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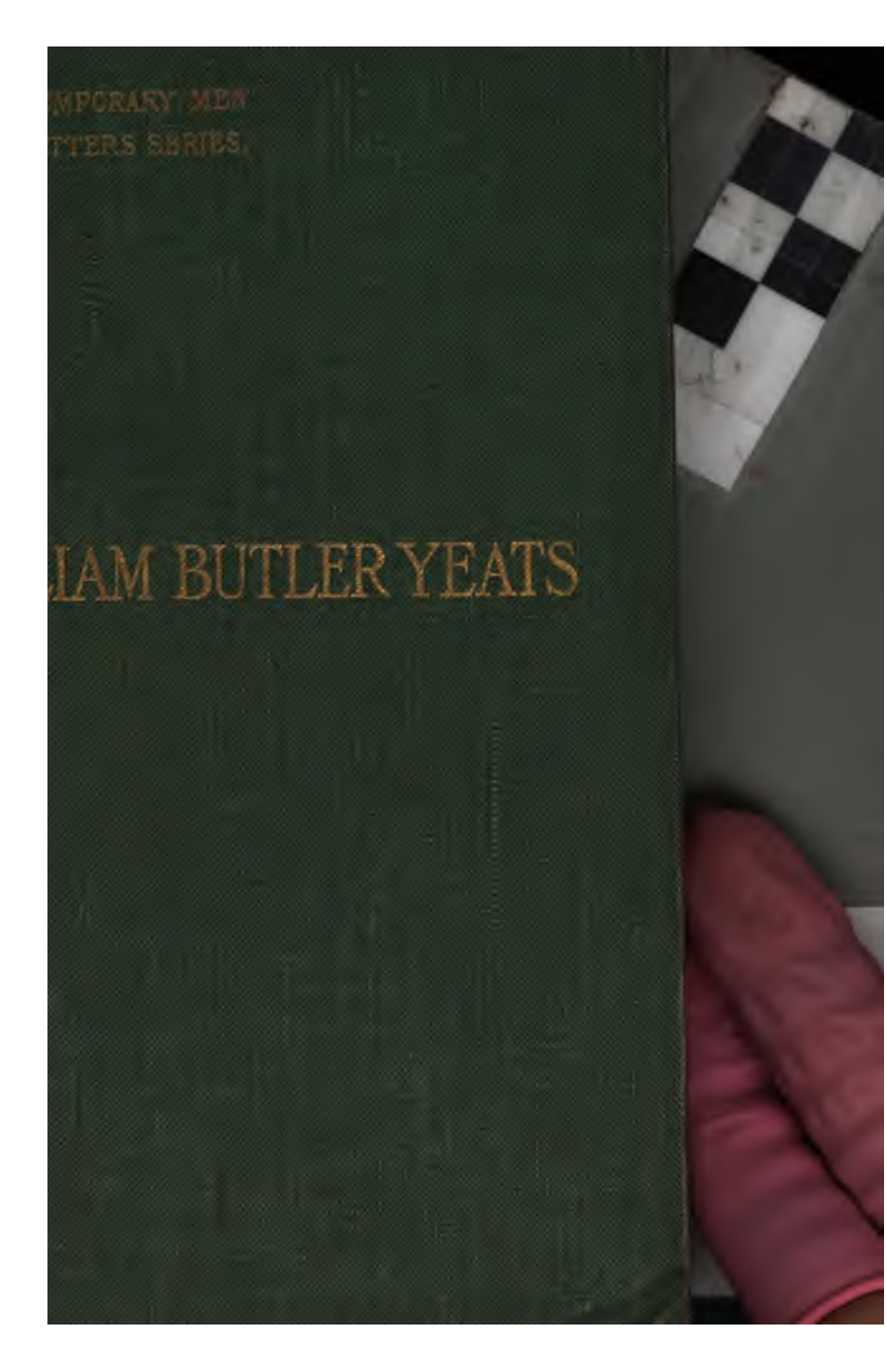

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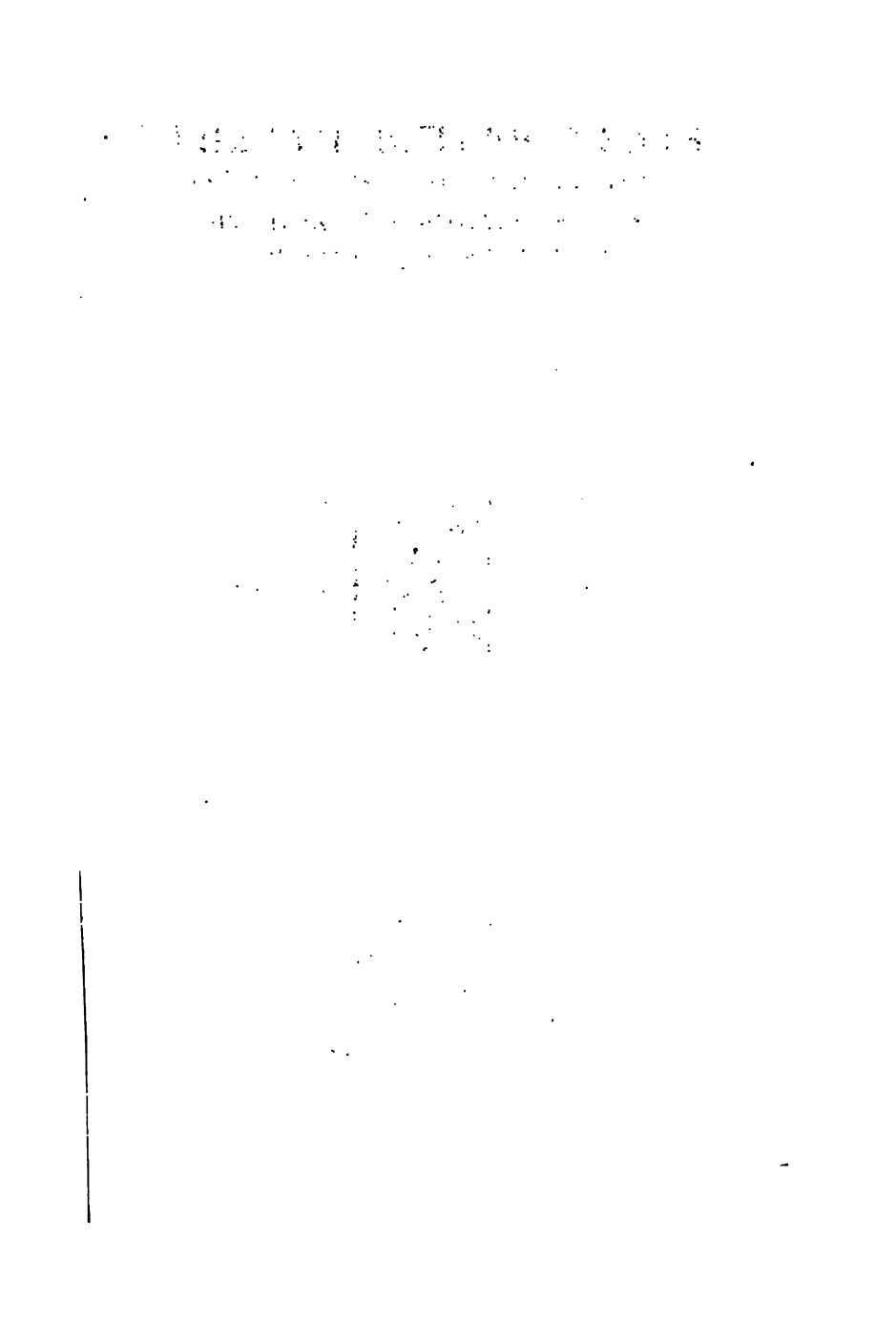

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

AND THE IRISH LITERARY REVIVAL

BY HORATIO SHEAFE KRANS

AUTHOR OF IRISH LIFE IN IRISH FICTION

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WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

AND THE IRISH LITERARY REVIVAL

PREFACE

PREFACE

It is the aim of this book to give a sketch of the Irish literary revival that may serve as a background to the work of Mr. Yeats; to show how many phases of Irish life he has brought into literature, and in what sense he has given a new voice to the Celtic spirit; and in general to smooth the way to an enjoyment and appreciation of his poetry, plays, and stories. To understand these they must be seen in the light of beliefs in regard to mysticism and symbolism, which can only be come at by putting together stray hints scattered here and there through Mr. Yeats's work

and combining them with what is said by way of exposition in *Ideas of Good and Evil.* Readers who are not prepared to investigate these matters for themselves may be glad to have a volume from which some idea of the relation of his various productions to central principles of his philosophy, and the relation of one production to another, can be gained.

All who interest themselves in Irish literature in English must be grateful to the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke and Mr. T. W. Rolleston for the *Treasury of Irish Poetry,* which they have edited so admirably. That book and Mr. Gwynn's *Ireland To-day and To-morrow* I have found especially helpful. I wish to thank *The Outlook* for permission to use what I

chose of an article on Mr. Yeats and the literary revival that appeared in its pages, and Mr. John Lane, publisher of Mr. Yeats's *The Wind Among the Reeds*, for permission to quote from that volume. Finally, I wish to thank my friend, Mr. William Aspenwall Bradley, for many kind suggestions.

The titles of volumes in which poems mentioned in the text are to be found are given in the foot-notes.

A bibliography, covering all the work that Mr. Yeats has published, excepting what has appeared in the magazines, is appended.

H. S. K.

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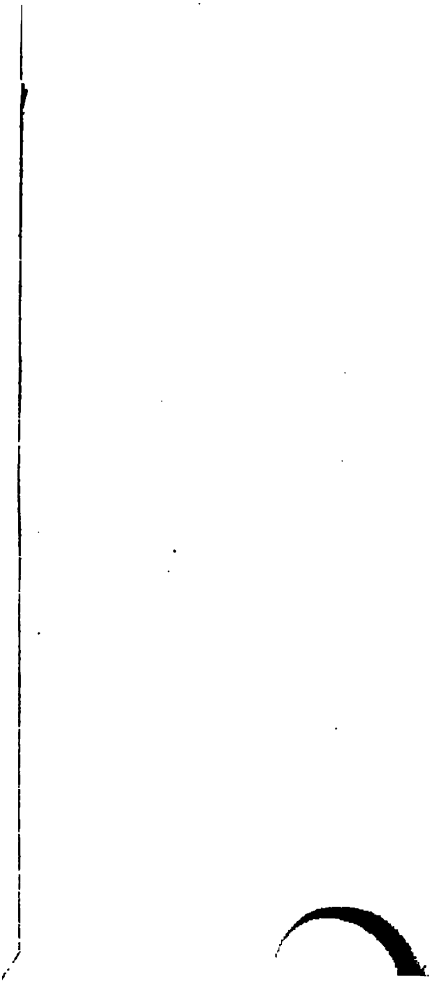
WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS



I

THE IRISH LITERARY REVIVAL: MR. YEATS

Mr. Yeats's recent visit to this country has called special attention to the work in drama, poetry, and fiction, of a group of young Irishmen who for some ten years have been opening up the life of Ireland past and present to the sympathy of the world, and throwing a new light upon Irish human nature. Some notion of the aims and accomplishment of this literary revival is a matter of general knowledge here, but perhaps few are aware how close the movement is to the

heart of Ireland, and how deeply it has influenced Irish life. Nothing ever begins, it is said, and the revival has its ancestry. But the history of Irish literature in English—of imaginative literature at least—is not a long one. The Irish novel began with the nineteenth century. Miss Edgeworth, Lever, and Lover are the important names in a group of Anglo-Irish novelists who wrote in the spirit of the old land-owning class. They brought into fiction types of the devil-may-care gentry whom their social and political fortunes and the Celtic extravagance of their dependents had unduly stimulated to recklessness and gayety. They also introduced the Irish peasant in two varieties—the droll, affectionate, pathetic

creature, and the Donnybrook Fair Irishman, characterised by whiskey wit, a Celtic screech, and the exhilarating whack of the shillelah. These writers presented the peasant with the greatest spirit, but only on the side he turned out to his betters. Contemporary with the Anglo-Irish novelists was a group of story-tellers —John and Michael Banim, William Carleton, and Gerald Griffin—all of Celtic stock, all more or less inspired by the Celtic spirit, and all writing more or less from the peasant's standpoint. They brought the real Irish peasant into literature, with all the lights and shadows of his character, from gayety to tragic intensity. Both these groups, though not all the novelists of either group, became a part of the

literary movement that reached its climax in 1848.

The pedigree of Irish poetry in English is little longer than that of the fiction. It began toward the end of the eighteenth century, with the ballads and songs of peasants, hedge-schoolmasters, and street-beggars. Thomas Moore, whose poems in the vein of "Believe me, if all those endearing young charms," were allowed to pass with many as an expression of the spirit of the brooding and melancholy Celt, was writing early in the nineteenth century. Then came Callanan, Walsh, and Mangan, with work of purely native inspiration and impassioned renderings from the Gaelic. Sir Samuel Ferguson and Aubrey de Vere wrote poetry that

drew deep upon Irish legend and romance for material. And Thomas Davis and his associates were the patriotic singers whose stirring songs rang through the whole of Ireland. Besides the more serious poetry, there was the verse that celebrated the mad quest of the old gentry for "divilment and divarshion," a verse spiced with bacchanalian wit and a wicked daring. Nothing just like it is written now, but it lives in such poems as "The Rakes of Mallow"—

Living short but merry lives;
Going where the devil drives;
Having sweethearts, but no wives,
Live the rakes of Mallow.

Or in Lever's "The Man for Galway":

To drink a toast,
A proctor roast,
Or bailiff as the case is;
To kiss your wife,
Or take your life,
At ten or fifteen paces;
To keep game-cocks; to hunt the fox;
To drink in punch the Solway;
With debts galore, but fun far more;
Oh, that's the man for Galway—

The stream of these various kinds of poetry, like the stream of fiction, went to swell the literary activity of '48, and in part flowed on after that activity had subsided.

Between the time of the writers of the middle of the century and the fall of Parnell, the old literary movement in Ireland was on the wane. The nation

seemed to be losing all taste for literature and art, and as a witty Irishman remarked, though the love of learning in Ireland might be, as the saying went, indestructible, it was certainly imperceptible. After the break-up of Parnell's political ship the stream of energy which had poured entirely into the stormy sea of politics took in part another channel. At this moment Ireland seems to have awakened to the realisation that while for years people had been in pursuit of political and agrarian reforms, they had forgotten to cultivate the finer elements of the national spirit. Once aware of this state of things, a company of young men sprang up, resolved to hold fast to the noblest traits of Irish life and character,

and to present them to Ireland and to the world in a worthy literary form. As early as 1890 Mr. Yeats observed the new spirit that was stirring, and in a volume of Irish stories * published in that year wrote:

"A true literary consciousness — national to the centre—seems gradually to be forming out of all this disguising and prettifying, this penumbra of half-culture. We are preparing likely enough for a new Irish literary movement—like that of '48—that will show itself in the first lull in politics."

He knew whereof he spoke, and proved a true prophet. Many of the young writers, who were soon to make their mark, were his friends, and at that moment

* *Representative Irish Tales.*

quietly at work away from the public eye. Two years later the National Literary Society was founded in Dublin; in 1893 the Irish Literary Society, of London, held its inaugural meeting. In the organisation of both these societies Mr. Yeats played an important part. And it was at about this time that the ranks of the young writers began to fill rapidly, and that the literary revival felt the consciousness of common aims and attained to something like the solidarity of a movement.

One group of writers in this new movement are translators, who have busied themselves with the material that is the driving force of the literary awakening in Ireland. They have been, and are now,

putting into English the old romances written in the Irish language, and the folk-lore that still lives upon the lips of the Irish-speaking peasants. In a brief survey of a many-sided movement but a representative name or two can be mentioned in connection with each phase of it.

Dr. Douglas Hyde—An Craoibhin, to give him his Gaelic designation—who is primarily to be identified with the language movement, belongs also with the translators. Few contemporary names are better known to the Irish people than his, and none is dearer to them. He is the president of the Gaelic League, the organisation for the preservation of the Irish language and the study of Irish literature, that now counts its membership

by thousands upon thousands, and is having a strong tonic effect upon the life of the whole nation. He is always ready to champion the Irish language against all comers, and in the last ten years has won hard-fought battles to give it the place the Leaguers claimed for it in Irish education. In this country Dr. Hyde is perhaps best known by his *Literary History of Ireland.* He has written, besides this work, much Gaelic prose and verse, and many translations from the Irish, notable among these latter the lyrics in the *Love Songs of Connaught,* poems full of grace and power, tenderness and fire, and of a fine literary quality. Mr. T. W. Rolleston is also to be counted among the translators. He did good work of another

kind, when, in collaboration with the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, he edited the *Treasury of Irish Poetry,* a collection of Irish poetry in English, and, like Dr. Hyde's *Literary History,* a monument of the present literary awakening. Since the appearance of her *Cuchulain of Muirtemne,* and *Gods and Fighting Men,* all will delight to accord to Lady Gregory a foremost place among those who have helped readers of English to enjoy a share of Ireland's contribution to the literature of the world. Mr. Yeats has spoken of *Cuchulain* as "the best book that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say the best book that has ever come out of Ireland," and of *Gods and Fighting Men* as worthy to put

beside it. These two books have come to many as a first revelation of the treasures buried in Gaelic literature, and they are destined certainly to do much for the floating of old Irish story upon the world. They aim to do for great cycles of Irish romance what Malory did for the Arthurian stories. Lady Gregory's work is not only that of a translator; she has arranged, selected, compressed, and fused into one harmonious whole great groups of tales. Her books are not mere grist to the mill of the scholar; they are books in which the great heroic emotions take splendid imaginative form; books that can be praised without reserve, and are sure to be read with delight by generations.

A second group, busy with the same material that occupies the translators, is made up of writers who have given themselves to the modernizing of the old Irish romances, artfully interweaving Celtic legend with more universal hopes and traditions. They have enriched the poetry of to-day by bringing to it a new romantic machinery, an unexhausted mythology, and a new set of incidents and characters from the old literature. Long before the literary revival Aubrey de Vere had handled Celtic legend, but the Celtic spirit did not rule in his work, and he was ever a stranger among the wild moods and fierce passions of Irish romance. It remained for the younger men to come to a fuller sympathy with the Celtic spirit,

though they might not surpass, nor even equal, de Vere's art. Among those who have succeeded in remakings of Irish romance may be mentioned Dr. Todhunter, William Larminie, Miss Nora Hopper, and Mr. Yeats. Mr. Larminie's *Moytura,* in which the battle between the gods of the Irish mythology shadows forth the nature of the eternal conflict between light and darkness, is a good instance of the way in which the old material is spiritualized and brought level with our own time.

A religious poetry as Irish in tone as the remakings of Gaelic romance and the translations from Gaelic originals is a phase of the literary revival. This poetry is chiefly Catholic, finding subjects and inspiration ready to its hand in the leg-

endary world of saints and miracles, and in all the passions connected with the history of the Church. The intensity which historical and social conditions lent to the religious spirit of Catholicism in Ireland found expression early in the last century in poetry. The Catholic poetry of to-day, while retaining the fervour of the earlier religious verse, has found a finer artistic vehicle. A high, keen, spiritual note, an element of mystic exaltation, or a naïve, devoted simplicity of faith, like that of an earlier age, give it a specialised and isolated note of its own. The best of the Catholic poetry is that of Lionel Johnson, whose too early death about a year ago took from the revival its poet of firmest fibre and its most resonant voice—the

only voice in which there was the cordial of a great courage. A note of triumph rings out from the tone of melancholy that pervades his work, even when he writes under the shadow of the wing of the dark angel that gives its name to one of the saddest of his poems. These stanzas from "Te Martyrum Candidatus" may suggest the quality of his best poetry:

Ah, see the fair chivalry come, the companions of Christ!
White Horsemen, who ride on white horses, the Knights of God!
They, for their Lord and their Lover who sacrificed
All, save the sweetness of treading, where He first trod!

These through the darkness of death, the dominion of night,
Swept, and they woke in white places at morning tide:
They saw with their eyes, and sang for joy of the sight,
They saw with their eyes the Eyes of the Crucified.

* * * * * * *

Now, whithersoever He goeth, with Him they go:
White Horsemen, who ride on white horses, oh fair to see!
They ride, where the rivers of Paradise flash and flow,
White Horsemen, with Christ their Captain: forever He!

Akin to this religious poetry is the poetry of mysticism, a very important element in the revival. Some of the most

finished work of the younger Irish poets has mysticism alone for its subject. Of the mystics Mr. G. W. Russell—A. E. is his *nom de plume*—is the chief. Mr. Russell might have sat for the portrait of the mystic and visionary, in Mr. Yeats's *Celtic Twilight,* whose poems, says the author of that book, "were endeavours to capture some high impalpable mood in a net of obscure images." Like that visionary, too, Mr. Russell is an artist, and a mystic in his art as in his poetry. His pictures, if they lack the technical qualities upon which the trained artist sets store, have still—as those who have seen them will be ready to testify—a life of their own, and haunt the memory like a strange vision. All Mr. Russell's poems

have their roots in a pantheism that is vital in his thought—a sense of an all-pervading, indwelling power, in whom all things are one, and which speaks symbolically to man from the "dumb brown lips of earth," revealing itself in the passion of human love, and—

In the kiss that warriors give,
Pausing in battle, and in the tears that fall
Over the vanquished foe,

or in the moods of tenderness borne in upon the soul by soft evening landscapes. For A. E. every clod of the valley has its mystic message—

I heard them in their sadness say,
The earth rebukes the thought of God:
We are but embers wrapped in clay,
A little nobler than the sod.

But I have touched the lips of clay;
Mother, thy rudest sod to me
Is thrilled with fire of hidden day
And haunted by all mystery.

With this pantheism there is the quietism that generally goes hand in hand with mysticism. It finds beautiful expression in stanzas like these:

What of all the will to do?
It has vanished long ago,
For a dream-shaft pierced it through
From the Unknown Archer's bow.

What of all the soul to think?
Someone offered it a cup
Filled with a diviner drink,
And the flame has burned it up.

What of all the hope to climb?
Only in the self we grope

To the misty end of time:
Truth has put an end to hope.

No writers of the revival are more sure of an appreciative audience than those who make the humour, pathos, and tragedy in the lives of the poor their subject. Everyone feels the distinctiveness of this poetry, and gets from it a kind of pleasure to be had nowhere else in literature. It is produced to-day by writers of high merit and general culture; among them may be mentioned Mr. Alfred Percival Graves and Miss Moira O'Neil. One need not wish racier Irish verse than Mr. Graves's "Father O'Flynn," to take a single example from the humorous poetry—

Of priests we can offer a charming variety,
Far renowned for larnin' and piety,
Still I'd advance you without impropriety,
Father O'Flynn as the flower of them all.
Here's a health to you, Father O'Flynn,
Slainte,* *and* slainte, *and* slainte *agin.*
Powerfullest preacher,
And tinderest teacher,
And kindliest creature in Old Donegal.

And one may go far to find a poem that sings in a more mournful voice of the homesickness that finds easy victims in Irishmen away from the old sod than does Miss O'Neil's song of the labourer in England, one of the band of labourers that annually take ship to help out the English harvesters. He pours out his

*["Your health."]

longing for the old country in the poem "Corrymeela"—a fine example of peasant poetry in the plaintive vein:

Over here in England I'm helping wi' the hay,
An' I wish I was in Ireland the livelong day;
Weary on the English, an' sorra take the wheat!
Och! Corrymeela an' the blue sky over it.

The people that's in England is richer nor the Jews,
There's not the smallest young gossoon but thravels in his shoes!
I'd give the pipe between me teeth to see a bare-fut child,
Och! Corrymeela an' the low south wind.

D'ye mind me now, the song at night is mortial hard to raise,
The girls are heavy goin' here, the boys are ill to plase;

When ones't I'm out this workin' hive, 'tis I'll be back again—

Aye, Corrymeela in the same soft rain.

The many novelists of the revival are pretty well known to us here, at least by reputation, and on this account the brevity of the comment upon them may the better stand excused. Mr. Standish James O'Grady's accounts of legendary Ireland, breathing the bardic afflatus of the hero age, his spirited historical romances, and his histories, interesting as romances in their full stream of narrative sweeping through a past abounding in stirring and picturesque scenes and incidents, have had an influence not likely to be overestimated in arousing that widespread and enthusiastic interest in Irish history and tra-

ditions, which is one great source of inspiration to the young Irish writers. In strong contrast to the work of O'Grady, with its epic breadth and spirit, are the poems and stories of Miss Barlow. It is her peculiar talent to present the peasant nature as it reveals itself in the trivial incidents of the daily round of domestic life. Her writings are faithful transcripts of the aspects of nature in Connemara, and those who know the country people well accept her work as a true literary expression of their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Miss Emily Lawless paints upon a larger canvas than Miss Barlow, and with more of stirring incident. Her books are in part an outlook upon the life of a remote region of

the west of Ireland, and are interesting, in one aspect, as an illustration of the religious preoccupation that is the governing factor in Irish peasant life.

There is pleasure to be had from the work of Seumas Macmannus and Shan Bullock, who make the North their field. The former sketches Donegal life mainly from the humorous standpoint, and tells the old folk-tales and fairy-tales which he himself has heard from the old women by their turf-fires, from the pedlar, the beggar-man, or the shanachy. That he tells these stories skilfully and with the perfect mastery of dialect and idiom that gives every one of them an honest smack of the soil, readers of *Through the Turf Smoke* and *Donegal Fairy Stories* will

be sure to agree. Mr. Bullock takes himself more seriously than Mr. Macmannus, and has more thought and deeper feeling. His novels, *The Squireen* and *The Barrys,* are pictures from the life of the squireens, small farmers, and small country gentry. The former story may, in its kind, be heartily commended as a realistic study of a national type. His *Irish Pastorals,* a collection of tales connected with occupations proper to the different seasons of the year, offers a sad outlook upon the necessitous life of the poor, which would be painfully gloomy but for the light of love and the glow of humour in it.

The ladies have done their full share of the work of the revival. In *Darby O'Gill and the Faeries* Miss Hermione Temple-

ton has written pleasantly of the "good people," somewhat in the manner of Mr. Macmannus, but she lacks that complete command of peasant idiom which, in skilled hands, can of itself add many a subtle shade to characterization. Miss Somerville and Miss Ross are favourably known in this country as the writers of humorous stories depicting, much in Lever's fashion, the life of the gentry and the middle class, and of the peasantry from their standpoint. There is no end of diversion in their books, full as they are of fun, practical jokes, and all the incidents that make up the hearty open-air life of sporting gentry—such are *The Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, and *All on the Irish Shore*. But a better book than

either of these is *The Real Charlotte*, a grim study of provincial life, which has genuine tragedy, humour, and photographic accuracy of observation.

Two novelists who have as good a claim to attention as any now writing are George Moore and Father Sheehan, in whose books pictures of the working effects of Catholicism in Ireland may be seen. They are pictures taken from opposite points of view. The reader can hang them side by side, and decide as he may where the truth lies. As to which is the more skilful and workmanlike there cannot be a moment's doubt. Mr. Moore has —in his short stories at least—the deftness, and the light, sure touch of the artist. His *Untilled Field* is, from the artistic

standpoint, among the most notable of the productions of the fiction of the revival. Father Sheehan's novels, *My New Curate* and *Luke Delmege*, are straggling and diffuse narratives, somewhat crude and provincial in manner, it must be confessed, and with something occasionally of the unconscious insincerity of sentimentality. But they have value as pictures of manners, and there is nothing to put beside them for the light they throw upon the life of the priesthood of modern Ireland on its best and pleasantest side.

No phase of the literary activity in Ireland has engaged more general attention than that concerned with the theory and practice of the drama. For years Mr. Yeats's dream had been to set going a

theatre for the presentation of literary plays that should appeal not merely to a cult but to the popular heart. The organisation called the Irish Literary Theatre, in whose institution Mr. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Mr. Martyn, joined later by Mr. George Moore, whose knowledge of the stage was well-nigh indispensable to the success of the adventure, has at last made this dream something like a reality. The dramatic activity, beginning in 1899, at a moment when there was a lull in the literary revival, gave the whole movement a new impulse. The performances of the Literary Theatre, and its successor, the Irish National Theatre Society, have been a practical illustration of the ideas for which Mr. Yeats

and his associates stand. These ideas grew out of a contempt for the commercial drama of the day, which, in their belief, had declined, as an amusement, to the level of a fair, a circus, or a race-course. Things had come to such a pass, they felt, that people who loved literature and poetry found it pleasanter to read at home than to go to plays where all was for the eye and nothing for the mind, where sham sentiment, shoddy ideals, and melodramatic thrills reigned supreme. They maintained, too, that the true philosophy of stage effects was unknown where the object seemed to be to smother the play under splendid costumes, magnificent furnishings, and realistic scenery, that only served to distract the audience

from the real business of the play, and to leave them agape at the ingenuity of stage-carpenters, costumers, and scene-painters. They agreed with Coleridge's dictum in the *Notes on Shakspeare* that "the attempt to cause the highest delusion possible to beings in their senses sitting in the theatre is a gross fault, incident only to low minds, which, feeling that they cannot affect the heart or head permanently, endeavour to call forth the momentary affections." In many respects the aims of those who founded the Literary Theatre were like the aims of the men who in London and Paris founded the Independent Theatre and the Théâtre Libre. They wished to substitute for the drama of spectacle, incident, vapid senti-

ment, and commonplace thought a drama of ideas and of sincere feeling, produced in a spirit of disinterested art, to please themselves and those who shared their tastes, and without any thought of catching the pennies of the crowd. Plays have been given by the two Irish dramatic organisations ranging all the way from poetic handlings of old Irish mythology to racy satires. Nor is the list of plays they themselves have produced the full measure of the dramatic activity they have started. A society that is an offshoot from them is now playing in Dublin and elsewhere; and the Gaelic Leaguers have turned their attention to the drama, and are now producing plays in the Irish language, that are meeting — notably

those by Dr. Hyde, Father Dineen, and Father O'Leary—a great popular success. It is but fair to the Literary Theatre to remark by the way that the first play in Irish to be produced in a playhouse of any kind was performed under its auspices.

The Irish playwrights believe that Ireland now is at that moment of her history when great drama is at least possible. They regard their absorbed and enthusiastic audiences as one evidence of this. The Irish audience, they find, goes to the play to be stirred, and is quick to kindle to sympathy or hostility, and different entirely from the English audience, that goes to the play to digest its dinner. All who have witnessed the performances in

Dublin have been struck by this difference in temper. It was well illustrated, to take a fair instance, when the galleries, at the first performances of the Literary Theatre, loudly applauded, not merely easy appeals to patriotism and strokes of obvious humour, but sentiments like this —"At all events, we have no proof that spiritual truths are illusory, whereas we know that the world is." Or like this— "There is always a right and a wrong way, and the wrong way always seems the most reasonable." And the dramatists rejoice to find that their audiences are mixed and representative of all classes— made up of notables, of lovers of literature and poetry, of the men who are making opinion in Ireland, and with them a

contingent of those who, perhaps neither rich, influential, nor distinguished, are still enthusiastic patrons.

On the whole, the Literary Theatre and the Irish National Theatre Society have had the support of the press of all ways of thinking, the society papers adding their meed of praise, though from time to time, when the toe of some interest seems trodden upon or some sensitive spot touched, warnings are heard and cries are raised of heresy and sedition. The press of London and New York has also applauded the plays and approved the aims of the Irish dramatists. From the modest beginning in 1899 to the performances of last fall the dramatic activity has continued unabated. The country

sends up plays and actors to the town, and the town sends plays and actors to the country. The two dramatic organisations have been a rallying-point for literary enthusiasms and aspirations: they have helped to make the literary play a living form again; and they have given an impulse to dramatic activity in Ireland that will not soon pass away.

In most of the varied activities of the Irish literary revival Mr. Yeats has played a leading part. He is the representative man of the movement. The son of an Irish artist of distinction, Mr. J. B. Yeats, R.H.A., William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin in 1866, and had his education chiefly in that city. There too for a time he gave himself to

the study of art. But he spent much of his youth with his grandparents in County Sligo. From *The Celtic Twilight,* his first prose work, it becomes plain how important an influence these boyhood days spent in the West had upon him. There he came completely under the spell of the fairy lore that still lived upon the lips of the people. About Drumcliff and the Rosses, where "to the wise peasant the green hills and woods around him are full of never-ending mystery," and where the whole country "breaks out in ghosts, fairies, and demons," he gathered many a crumb of fairy lore, and "found a short cut to the dim kingdom." In these places of unearthly resort, so *The Celtic Twilight* tells us, the peasant feels himself

perpetually haunted by supernatural presences, and is ever ready with complaints like that of a dweller in these scenes, which the book records:

"By the cross of Jesus! how shall I go? If I pass by the hill of Dunboy old Captain Burney may look out on me. If I go round by the water, and up by the steps, there is the headless one, and another on the quays, and a new one under the old churchyard wall. If I go round the other way, Mrs. Stewart is appearing at the Hillside Gate, and the devil himself is in the hospital lane."

Mr. Yeats early interested himself in magic, which he has since followed through many devious and occult byways, until now he may be regarded as a

past master in all the arcana of the art; and *The Celtic Twilight* tells of some of his experiences with its practitioners. The same book tells also of mystic communications from "those beings or bodiless moods, or whatever they be that inhabit the world of spirits," and of visions that came to him "vivid and solid-looking, like the material world under my feet." Indeed its author is, as he appears from these stories to be, by nature a mystic and a visionary.

The Dublin University Review introduced Mr. Yeats as a poet, "The Island of Statues," his first printed poem, appearing in that magazine when he was just nineteen years old. He gave himself enthusiastically in his boyhood days

to the study of the English poets; and to the study of Irish literature in English, reading omnivorously in this direction, and laying the foundations of a comprehensive knowledge of the literary manifestations of Irish life, in which he is surpassed by none. In 1887 Mr. Yeats's family moved to London, and he went with them to devote himself to literary work, contributing to the magazines, publishing from time to time a volume of verse or prose, and amid these labours giving himself, in collaboration with Mr. Ellis, to a systematic study of William Blake, which resulted eventually in that monument to Blake's genius, the sumptuous edition of his works, with its memoir and exposition of the poet's philosophy.

In 1890 he spent some time in Paris, where his interest in magic led him to cultivate the acquaintance of Le Sar Peladan —he of the silken robes and Chaldean beard, the Rosicrucian mage and founder of the Order of the Rose†Croix, who, in the dim, red-lit rooms of his house in Passy, saw visions and raised innocuous ghosts for the edification of his disciples. From 1891 to 1894 Mr. Yeats was back in Dublin, returning to London again in the latter year. In 1895, feeling that he was getting too far away from the life of Ireland, and drifting too much into the moods that produced "The Rosa Alchemica" and "The Tables of the Law," he returned to his native country and gave himself to the study of folk-lore, working

much with Lady Gregory in collecting stories from the peasantry and in studying the poetic material offered by the old romances, which Lady Gregory has since put into English. From 1896 to the time of his visit to America this last fall he has made his headquarters now in London, now in Dublin. In his years of London life he did not forget Ireland and its literature; on the contrary, the national element in his work became stronger and stronger, and his devotion to all that was characteristically Irish, if it could not grow warmer and more entire, at least was no whit abated.

Mr. Yeats's poems, plays, and essays, known to lovers of good literature all over the English-speaking world, had pre-

pared the way for the hearty welcome he received here. People were glad of the opportunity his lectures afforded to hear from his own lips an account of the literary activity in Ireland and whatever he had to say of his ideas and his art. During his stay in America he travelled from the Atlantic to the Pacific, addressing universities, colleges, and literary societies by the way. The attendance at his lectures in New York and elsewhere must have been to him a pleasant assurance of the interest people here are taking in the literary awakening in Ireland and in his own work.

In appearance Mr. Yeats is to-day precisely as Mr. George Moore described him some years ago, under the name of

Ulick Dean, in his musical novel *Evelyn Innes:*

"He had one of those long Irish faces, all in a straight line, with flat, slightly hollow cheeks, and a long chin. It was clean-shaven, and a heavy lock of black hair was always falling over his eyes. It was his eyes that gave the sombre ecstatic character to his face. They were large, dark, deeply set, singularly shaped, and they seemed to smoulder like fires in caves, leaping and sinking out of the darkness. He was a tall, thin young man, and he wore a black jacket and a large necktie, tied with the ends hanging loose over his coat."

Though there is nothing of the *poseur* in his manner, Mr. Yeats still looks the

part of poet and mystic, and whether on the busy streets, on the public platform, or in social gatherings, one cannot fail to notice in him a certain detachment from his surroundings, an aloofness from the stream of daily happenings and interests of the moment. He is at his best when at home with a friend or two. Then the talk flows freely and pleasantly, and the listener soon recognises behind the easy, unconstrained conversation a mind mellowed by culture and well stored with ideas, and a nature kindly, indulgent, and good-humoured. It is only the kindling eyes, looking strangely old in a face otherwise youthful, that tell of the inner life of the poet, mystic, and visionary. Even in dis-

cussing his ideas and his art he is never unduly solemn or dogmatic. His most esoteric doctrines are advanced with such an air of sweetness and light that they seem to lose something of their extravagance, and to put their best foot foremost. A flash of wit or a quaint humour with an Irish charm of its own brightens his conversation, even when it is concerned with his most serious convictions. Nor is enthusiasm wanting in his talk, and it is good to see the love of Ireland flame out now and again from the midst of quiet discourse upon this or that. In Mr. Yeats there is a very unusual combination of mystic, and practical reformer with something of a propaganda of his own. And

it is certainly pleasant to find that so agreeably harmonious a blend of character can result from elements that are seemingly antagonistic and irreconcilable.

II

POEMS BASED UPON IRISH MYTH LEGEND AND ROMANCE

The chief inspiration of the literary revival is the love of the legends and romances that belong to the Gaelic past of Ireland, and the desire to make their strange beauty known to the modern world. No one sets a higher value upon the ancient creations of the Irish imagination than Mr. Yeats, and no one knows better than he the need and use of getting them into English. He is eager to interest the people of to-day in the old nobility—the heroic temper, the courtesy, the generosity, the faithfulness among

friends, and the courage in the face of enemies, which are the cardinal virtues of Celtic romance. This task he has essayed in lyrics and narrative poems, in plays, and in prose tales. Of the poems that draw on Gaelic sources some, it would seem, aim to reproduce the heroic spirit, while others run the author's own sentiment, which is akin to the gentle, dreamy moods of Irish romance, into the mould of the Gaelic stories. Notable among the poems of the former group are "The Death of Cuhoolin," * "On Baile's Strand," † and "The Old Age of Queen Maeve." †

In "The Death of Cuhoolin" and "On Baile's Strand," the first a short poem in

* Poems. † In The Seven Woods.

rhymed couplets, the second a one-act play in mixed blank verse and prose—here to be considered as a revival of romance, not as a drama—the situations and characters come from the Red Branch cycle. Each tells of the combat between Cuhoolin and his son, and of the death of both. A father and son, neither knowing his relationship to the other, engage in single combat, and the son is slain. The father discovers the youth's identity, and, maddened by his grief, dies battling with the waves of the sea. The situation is essentially that of Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum." But neither the poem nor the play has anything like the sweep and depth of emotion of Arnold's narrative. Neither seems to have responded well to

the heroic spirit, and, though they both deal with one of the most tragic situations of Irish literature, neither has captured the grand note of primitive tragedy that is heard in the romances. Nor have they the peculiar charm of those poems that are deeply coloured by the poet's personality.

If the heroic note did not ring clear in "The Death of Cuhoolin" and "On Baile's Strand," the same criticism is not likely to be made of "The Old Age of Queen Maeve," which speaks, in a blank verse of grave and dignified cadence, and in a diction of noble simplicity, of the great spirit, high courage, and firm mind of Queen Maeve. Through this poem echoes of the poetry of the hero age are heard. It tells how the great Queen, at

the request of Aengus, the god of love of the Celtic mythology, dug into a hill that was sacred to the fairies, and how she stood undaunted in the whirling rout of strange forms, shadowy and terrible, assumed by the spirits to fright her from the work:

And all that night, and all through the next day
To middle night, they dug into the hill.
At middle night great cats with silver claws,
Bodies of shadow and blind eyes like pearls,
Came up out of the hole, and red-eared hounds
With long white bodies came out of the air
Suddenly, and ran at them and harried them.

The Maines' children dropped their spades, and stood
With quaking joints and terror-strucken faces,

Till Maeve called out, "These are but common men.
The Maines' children have not dropped their spades
Because Earth crazy for its broken power
Casts up a show and the winds answer it
With holy shadows." Her high heart was glad,
And when the uproar ran along the grass
She followed with light footfall in the midst,
Till it died out where an old thorn tree stood.

In "The Old Age of Queen Maeve" may be recognised that kinship of spirit between the poetry of the Irish heroic age and the Homeric epics, which students of the Gaelic have so often remarked. But this poem and others of the same kind are rather appreciations of the temper of ancient Irish literature than embodiments

of it. They belong to the poetry of an age of thought, revolting against itself, and imitating the poetry of an age of action.

It is when the beautiful old stories are used as a frame for the poet's own sentiment and point of view that they make their strongest appeal. The blank-verse poem, "Fergus and the Druid," * is a good instance of Mr. Yeats's way of putting his own stamp upon what he borrows. According to Lady Gregory's rendering of the situation, Fergus lays down his sceptre against his will and under constraint from the men of Ulster. Mr. Yeats plants his own idea in the heart of the situation by changing the motive of the King's abdication. The Fergus of

* Poems.

his poem longs to escape the duties and responsibilities of kingship, and is glad at last to change his crown for the bag of dreams offered him by the druid. The motive of the poem is in these verses—

DRUID

What would you?

FERGUS

I would be no more a king,
But learn the dreaming wisdom that is yours.

DRUID

Look on my thin gray hair and hollow cheeks,
And on these hands that may not lift the sword,
This body trembling like a wind-blown reed.
No maiden loves me, no man seeks my help,
Because I be not of the things I dream.

FERGUS

A wild and foolish labourer is a king,
To do and do and do, and never dream.

DRUID

Take, if you must, this little bag of dreams;
Unloose the cord, and they will wrap you round.

"The Madness of King Goll," * the story of the monarch, who, according to the legend, went mad, and hid himself in a valley near Cork, comes straight from Mr. Yeats's standpoint. He is no stranger to the mood that runs through all the veins of the poem, and gives life to every haunting line — the mood of eager, awed expectancy in which the King, alert to catch the mystic messages from the spirit world that everywhere closes in upon him, sees keen eyes peer at him from the night, hears the tramp of unseen feet, and cannot hush the voices

* Poems.

in the winds and waters, in which cry the powers who are busy shaping the lives of men. Here nature is presented, in the true Celtic spirit, as haunted by mysterious presences, that seem to speak to man of his origin and destiny. The two stanzas that follow may give some notion of the beauty of the music, the felicity of diction, and the charm of the wild mood which is shut in this lyric, by virtue of all which "The Madness of King Goll" must be counted among the best of Mr. Yeats's shorter poems:

But slowly, as I shouting slew
And trampled in the bubbling mire,
In my most secret spirit grew
A whirling and a wandering fire:

I stood: keen stars above me shone,
Around me shone keen eyes of men:
I laughed aloud and hurried on
By rocky shore and rushy fen;
I laughed because birds fluttered by,
And starlight gleamed, and clouds flew high,
And rushes waved and waters rolled.
They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me,
the beech leaves old.

And now I wander in the woods
When summer gluts the golden bees,
Or in autumnal solitudes
Arise the leopard-coloured trees;
Or when along the wintry strands
The cormorants shiver on their rocks;
I wander on, and wave my hands,
And sing, and shake my heavy locks.
The gray wolf knows me, by one ear
I lead along the woodland deer;

The hares run by me growing bold.
They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me,
the beech leaves old!

The story of Baile and Aillinn has more than once been put into English, but never with a freer sweep of lyrical emotion or more melodiously than in the poem * of Mr. Yeats's that takes its name from this famous pair of lovers. It is a ballad-like poem, in rhyming couplets that happily escape the monotony of movement incident to this kind of verse. The argument tells the story in a word:

"Baile and Aillinn were lovers, but Aengus, the Master of Love, wishing them to be happy in his own land among the dead, told to each a story of the other's

* In The Seven Woods.

death, so that their hearts were broken, and they died."

A trend of feeling that finds its way often into Mr. Yeats's poetry has a place in the rendering of this old tale—a discontent with the world as it is, and a preoccupation with dreams of a better, in the light of which the actual world is a faded and dusty thing. From the standpoint of this poem the tragic fate of Baile and Aillinn is a happy thing, for—

Their love was never drowned in care
Of this or that thing, nor grew cold
Because their bodies had grown old;
Being forbid to marry on earth
They blossomed to immortal mirth.

* * * * * * *

Has lover lived but longed to wive
Like them that are no more alive?

No Irish tale has found a finer form in English verse than that which Mr. Yeats has given to the story of Oisin (Ossian), as told in "The Wanderings of Oisin," * the poem that gave his first published volume its title. Dominated by a mood thoroughly characteristic of the poet, it is, the dramas excepted, his longest and most sustained flight, and has a romantic witchery and beguilement unsurpassed if not unequalled elsewhere in his work. Though abounding in lyrical passages and enlivened by dramatic dialogue, "Oisin" is narrative in form. It tells of the love of the Princess Niam, an immortal woman, for Oisin; of how she carried him, bound by the spell of her beauty,

* Poems.

riding over the green sea, to spend three hundred years with her in the Land of the Ever-Young; and of how, at the end of three centuries, Oisin returned, to feel the weight of his years fall on him. He had left Ireland in its heroic days of glorious paganism; he returned to find his companions, the pagan heroes, long dead, St. Patrick and his priests busy with prayer and penance, and a new Christian Ireland raised upon the ruins of the old. Oisin himself, in his old age—"broken with pain and years"—tells the story to St. Patrick.

The romantic charm of the world into which Niam and her lover ride is what makes the first impression in "The Wanderings of Oisin." One need go but a

little way into the poem for the assurance that the poet is free of a kingdom in that world of romance in which Malory and Spenser, each in his own way, rules a realm. Nor would it be fanciful to maintain that the intellectual traditions, if not the blood, of the race that gave romance and the realm of fairy to European literature are still potent here. The mythic country of everlasting youth is the world conjured into being by the romantic magic of the Celtic imagination, a world strange in its personages, in its happenings, and in its landscape and pageantry. Niam, whom Oisin met and loved, is a creature of a spiritual life as intense as the fairy woman in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The passage that in-

troduces her is a masterly piece of romantic portraiture:

A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
On a horse with a bridle of findrinny;
And like a sunset were her lips,
A stormy sunset on doomed ships;
A citron colour gloomed in her hair,
But down to her feet white vesture flowed,
And with the glimmering crimson glowed
Of many a figured embroidery;
And it was bound with a pearl-pale shell
That wavered like the summer streams,
As her soft bosom rose and fell.

Quite as memorable in another way is the demon of the second book of the poem, who wanders in that vast rocky hall whose description recalls the pictures in "Hyperion":

And on the runnel's stony and bare edge
A dusky demon dry as withered sedge
Swayed crooning to himself an unknown tongue:
In a sad revelry he sang and swung
Bacchant and mournful, passing to and fro
His hand along the runnel's side as though
The flowers still grew there.

The landscape and pageantry in Oisin are as fine in their way as the portraiture; these glimpses, for example, of the Country of the Ever-Young, where nature is seen in its weird power and fairy charm:

But now the moon like a white rose shone
In the pale west, and the sun's rim sank,
And clouds arrayed their rank on rank
About his crimson fading ball:
* * * * * * *
And with low murmurs we rode on,
Where many a trumpet-twisted shell

That in immortal silence sleeps
Dreaming of her own melting hues,
Her golds, her ambers, and her blues,
Pierced with soft light the shallowing deeps.

* * * * * * *

The horse toward the music raced,
Neighing along the lifeless waste;
Like sooty fingers, many a tree
Rose ever out of the warm sea;
And they were trembling ceaselessly,

* * * * * * *

Round every branch the song birds flew,
Or clung thereon like swarming bees;
While round the shore a million stood
Like drops of frozen rainbow light,
And pondered in a soft vain mood,
Upon their shadows in the tide,
And told the purple deeps their pride,
And murmured snatches of delight;

And on the shores were many boats
With bending sterns and bending bows,
And carven figures on their prows
Of bitterns, and fish-eating stoats,
And swans with their exultant throats.

The romantic beauty of "Oisin" is what makes the first impression. After this will be remarked the dominant unity of the mood. Here the poet has found a way to weave upon the old frame of legend a tapestry of rich poetic texture, whose pictured story tells of his own longing for a life of the spirit, free from mortal limitations, from the chains of custom and convention, and from the hard tyranny of time, and change, and death. This mood, here one of wistful longing, is in much of Mr. Yeats's work, and,

growing more militant and aggressive, later becomes at one with the Celt's spirit of immemorial revolt against the tyranny of the real. This mood is in the lyrics of the first book, in the song in the following passage, for example:

And in a wild and sudden dance
We mocked at time and fate and chance,

* * * * * * *

And, gathered in a panting band,
We flung on high each waving hand,
And sang unto the starry broods:
In our raised eyes there flashed a glow
Of milky brightness to and fro
As thus our songs arose: "You stars,
Across your wandering ruby cars
Shake the loose reins: you slaves of God
He rules you with an iron rod,

He holds you with an iron bond,
Each one woven to the other,
Each one woven to his brother
Like bubbles in a frozen pond;
But we in a lonely land abide
Unchainable as the dim tide,
With hearts that know nor law nor rule,
And hands that hold no wearisome tool
Folded in love that knows no morrow,
Nor the gray wandering osprey Sorrow."

Not the least interest of this poem is the use made of the striking dramatic element that is part of all the Ossianic stories, the clash, that is, of the old pagan spirit represented by Oisin, and the spirit of the new Christianity that speaks from the lips of St. Patrick. The world Oisin had known was a world that loved "the

roaring of laughter and song," a world where there was

Nor languor nor fatigue: an endless feast,
An endless war.

The life his ideals sanctioned was a life of battle and revel, of dance and joy. He honoured the hand that held the sword, and scorned the hand that held the crosier. Words could not tell his contempt for the psalm-singing monks, who

Murder song
With barren words and lying flatteries of the weak.

Nor could he understand the worship of the

Milk pale face
Under a crown of thorns and dark with blood.

In vain does Patrick of the crooked cro-

sier seek to make him a Christian; in vain does he seek, by threats of the pains of hell, to dispel his pagan dreams of wine and song, of love and war. Though "bent and bald and blind, with a heavy heart and a wandering mind," Oisin holds fast to his pagan ways, and his last wish, as he flings away his rosary, is that he may join the pagan heroes, whether their place be heaven or hell:

'It were sad to gaze on the blessed and no man I
loved of old there;
I throw down the chain of small stones! when
life in my body has ceased,
I will go to Caolte, and Conan, and Bran, Sgeolan,
Lomair,
And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they
in flames or at feast.

A full stream of sympathy sets toward the dauntless old pagan as he champions the heroic qualities in their conflict with the saintly and passive virtues.

The music of the poem, which is in rhymed verses of different length, is strikingly fine—not the music of the mere accomplished versifier, but that of a poet of rare melodic faculty, who never permits his verse to slip into the insistent jingle and slipshod melody that are the pitfalls of long rhymed poems. Now and then in the music, as in the diction and the phrasing, there are echoes of Keats, of Shelley, of Coleridge, and of Tennyson—pleasant assurances that the poet has enriched his spirit and formed his art in the school of the masters. Gaelic

in subject and inspiration, "Oisin" evinces a remarkable literary faculty, romantic beauty, and musical skill of a high order, and reveals a complete poetic temperament. A poem of generous length, there is yet no lapse in sentiment, style, or music from the levels of pure poetry. It is this sustained poetic quality that has given Mr. Yeats his distinction among the poets of the younger generation. "Oisin" and the other poems based upon Irish romance are one more illustration of the adaptability of the old legends to the purposes of modern poetry; and in them the Gaelic stories have a new flowering. They render the spirit of the heroic age for the most part on one side—not in its virile passion, in its triumphant, buoyant, or

poignantly tragic note, but when it is softly dreaming of happy worlds beyond, of love, and feasts, and phantom, bloodless fights; or when it stands awe-struck at the touch of supernatural powers.

III

POEMS CHIEFLY LYRICAL

In his essay, "Ireland and the Arts," Mr. Yeats has said that when he sees Irish artists going far afield for their subjects, throwing their scenes in strange lands, and working from foreign models, he is jealous for Ireland. He would have native artists take their material from their own land, that, in good time, they may give every hill and valley, wood and stream of Ireland its imaginative associations, and make "whatever a man can see from his own door an excitement to his imagination." What he has urged others

to do he has done himself. The poems that were spoken of in the preceding chapter brought their subjects and inspiration out of the past of Irish legend and romance. In a group of ballads and lyrics of humble life Mr. Yeats turns from the past to the Irish life of the present, which he himself knows so intimately, and understands so well. The ballads are all based upon facts or local traditions. By their plainness and simple truth, by their homeliness and directness, they recall the ballads of Wordsworth. "The Ballad of Moll Magee" and "The Ballad of Father Gilligan" are the best of them, and the latter, in which the introduction of the supernatural throws a light of romance over the humble story, is perhaps

the best of all. One can fancy that none but an Irish imagination, with its special kindness for the *soggarth aroon,* could have fashioned the tale of Father Gilligan, in which the particular kind of good-nature is attributed to the Deity that prompts the working of a miracle to soothe the conscience of the old priest who dropped asleep in his chair, when he should have been riding post-haste to the death-bed of one of his flock. These ballads, with their simple melody and artful homeliness, represent one extreme of Mr. Yeats's compass of sentiment, style, and music. They all have the charm of a purely native product, both in the movement of the emotion and in the expression of it; and the same may be said of lyrics

of peasant life, like "The Lament of the Old Pensioner," "The Meditations of an Old Fisherman," and "The Fiddler of Dooney."

There is a world of difference between the directness of feeling and plainness of expression in these ballads and lyrics of humble life and the subtlety of motive, elaborate music, and carefully shaded sentiment of the love-poems. A few of the latter are, by exception, simple enough, and charming in their simplicity—"To an Isle in the Water" and "Down by the Sally Gardens," for example, the one a fanciful playing with love, the other the sigh of a rejected lover, and both in their way faultless. A finer poem than either of the above, simple, too, like them, though

not without its mystic suggestion at the close, is "When You are Old." It is an expression of one kind of love that finds a place in Mr. Yeats's work—not a love passionate with the fine sensuousness of the most vital love poetry, but a sentiment that is tender, pure, and lasting.

Much that Mr. Yeats has written, whatever the subject, is haunted by a sense of the ravages time makes upon the body and upon the spirit while the body is its home. Out of this sense grow poems like "The Falling of the Leaves" and "The White Birds," the former a lament over "the hour of the waning of love," the latter a longing for a world like that to which Niam took Oisin, where time and change and death and sorrow cannot en-

ter. And from the same feeling, it seems, arises a distrust of the love that goes out to objects of human affection. The personages of the poems will not pin their faith to it, or if they do, find it a delusion. Such is the experience of the lovers in "Ephemera." The woman of the poem laments that their love is dead. But the man, with more of the philosophic mind, consoles her with the reflection that though love burns out, it is still the point of departure for an eternity of passion:

"Ah, do not mourn," he said,
"That we are tired, for other loves await us:
Hate on and love through unrepining hours;
Before us lies eternity; our souls
Are love, and a continual farewell."

But the most constant aspect under

which love is presented in this poetry is that of a mystic longing for an impossible beauty that can never in this world be possessed. This is symbolised in a general way in "The Song of Wandering Aengus," * which tells of Aengus's pursuit of the

Glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;

And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,

* The Wind Among the Reeds.

The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

It was this same longing that inspired the man in "The Secret Rose," * who for numberless years sought for the—

Woman of so shining loveliness
That men threshed corn at midnight by a tress.

In "Michael Robartes Remembers Forgotten Beauty," * one of the very best of Mr. Yeats's short poems, the woman whom the lover addresses becomes the symbol of all beauty, and love for her, transcending the love for the individual, becomes a love of all loveliness:

When my arms press you round I press
My heart upon the loveliness

* The Wind Among the Reeds.

That has long faded from the world;
The jewelled crowns that kings have hurled
In shadowy pools, when armies fled;
The love tales wove with silken thread
By dreaming ladies upon cloth
That has made fat the murderous moth;
The roses that of old time were
Woven by ladies in their hair,
The dew-cold lilies ladies bore
Through many a sacred corridor
Where such gray clouds of incense rose
That only the gods' eyes did not close:
For that pale breast and lingering hand
Come from a more dream-heavy land,
A more dream-heavy hour than this;
And when you sigh from kiss to kiss
I hear white Beauty sighing too
For hours when all must fade like dew.

It is when love has thus passed into spiritual longing and the desire for an

absolute beauty in all things, that it takes on value in the poet's eyes. But the poetry that looks upon woman as a vague vision, an intermediary between man and a spiritual world, not as a vital element in man's life here and now, and that makes love but a stepping-stone to a philosophical conception, is not the poetry that appeals most strongly to the heart or to the imagination. The relation of the ideas that underlie these poems to the Platonic ideas of love and beauty is obvious; but the moods that are behind them are very different. Plato's lover soars serenely, hopefully, and on unwearied wing toward the ideal, while the lover of the modern poet, seeking sadly and half-hopelessly for an "impossible beauty," finds the

quest of the absolute a burden. These love lyrics that have been considered are exquisitely graceful, lovely in their music, and subtle in their thought, and have all the interest of poetry that blends the critical and speculative with its sentiment. But in the midst of their perusal one may find himself longing for a song of Burns, and complaining that the poet here considers too carefully, and weighs down his verses with reflection.

No part of Mr. Yeats's work is inspired with a finer fervour than the group of poems that tell of the artist's quest of beauty and of his finding it gleaming everywhere from the dust and soil of earth. To this group belong those poems that take their names, or their symbolism,

or both, from the rose, the emblem of spiritual love and supreme beauty. The pursuit of the "red-rose-bordered hem" of beauty is in part the theme of "To Ireland in Coming Times" *:

Know, that I would accounted be
True brother of that company,
Who sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song;
Nor be I any less of them,
Because the red-rose-bordered hem
Of her, whose history began
Before God made the angelic clan,
Trails all about the written page.

* * * * * * *

I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you, in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem.

* Poems.

And the finding of this beauty is in part the theme of "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" *:

Red rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!
Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways:
* * * * * * *
Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,
I find under the boughs of love and hate,
In all poor foolish things that live a day,
Eternal beauty wandering on her way.

"Aedth Tells of the Rose in His Heart" † comes from a feeling the opposite of that of the poems whose theme is the pursuit and the finding of beauty. Though it may be, in its first intention, a love poem, it still voices the complaint of the artist and idealist, pained as intensely by the

* Poems. † The Wind Among the Reeds.

jangling discords of life as he is delighted by its harmonies:

'All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old,
The cry of a child by the roadway, the creak of a lumbering cart,
The heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing the wintry mould,
Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart.

Mysticism and the symbolic method underlie the most of Mr. Yeats's lyrics, but certain of them spring more directly than the rest from mystic faith and doctrine —

"The dim wisdoms old and deep
That God gives unto man in sleep.

In "The Everlasting Voices"* mysterious

* The Wind Among the Reeds.

intimations, vague and unformulated, are heard in the call of birds and in the voices of winds and waves:

O sweet everlasting Voices be still;

* * * * * * *

Have you not heard that our hearts are old,
That you call in birds, in wind on the hill,
In shaken boughs, in tide on the shore?
O sweet everlasting Voices be still.

"Into the Twilight" * speaks of mystic influences at work in the heavens and the earth:

Come, heart, where hill is heaped upon hill:
For there the mystical brotherhood
Of sun and moon and hollow and wood
And river and stream work out their will;
And God stands winding his lonely horn,
And time and the world are ever in flight;

* The Wind Among the Reeds

And love is less kind than the gray twilight,
And hope is less kind than the dew of the morn.

"The Song of the Happy Shepherd" * comes straight from the mystic standpoint, and carries orthodox mystic doctrine in its stream of lyric feeling. The contempt for science, the depreciating of deeds, the importance of the life of revery and dream, the conviction that truth is not to be come at by studious toil—all these ideas and feelings find a place in this poem:

"Then nowise worship dusty deeds,
Nor seek, for this is also sooth,
To hunger fiercely after truth,
Lest all thy toiling only breeds
New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth

* Poems.

Saving in thine own heart. Seek, then,
No learning from the starry men,
Who follow with the optic glass
The whirling ways of stars that pass—
Seek, then, for this is also sooth,
No word of theirs—the cold star-bane
Has cloven and rent their hearts in twain,
And dead is all their human truth.

* * * * * * *

Dream thou!
For fair are poppies on the brow:
Dream, dream, for this is also sooth.

"The Two Trees," * another of the mystic poems, must be counted one of the most profound of Mr. Yeats's lyrics, and in beauty second to none, remarkable both for its music, and for the loveliness of the

* Poems.

symbolism which is here perfectly vitalised by the imagination. Nowhere else in his work does the power of the line give such authority to the message of a poem. It is the mystic's praise of the inner life, the inner vision, and holds that the external world is dry as desert dust, until the spirit of man has recreated it, and made it quick with life and beauty:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear.
The changing colours of its fruit
Have dowered the stars with merry light;
The surety of its hidden root
Has planted quiet in the night;
The shaking of its leafy head
Has given the waves their melody,

And made my lips and music wed,
Murmuring a wizard song for thee.
There, through bewildered branches, go
Winged Loves borne on in gentle strife,
Tossing and tossing to and fro
The flaming circle of our life.
When looking on their shaken hair,
And dreaming how they dance and dart,
Thine eyes grow full of tender care:
Beloved, gaze in thine own heart.

Many beautiful lyrics that might be classified in one or other of the preceding groups, and many miscellaneous lyrics, must remain unnoticed. But of the latter some cannot be passed by without a word, among these the two lovely songs, "The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes" * and "A Cradle Song," * both of an ex-

* Poems.

quisite simplicity and grace, and the second in a most sweetly pure and plaintive key. Another of these lyrics is "The Dedication of a Book of Irish Stories," * which breathes a yearning affection for the Irish "exiles"the world over, that must have touched a responsive chord in the hearts of the poet's compatriots wherever it found them. And finally there is "Innisfree," * a poem that called a letter of enthusiastic praise from Robert Louis Stevenson, and has been a general favourite with Mr. Yeats's readers. In it is the longing for rural peace, and the sights, sounds, and solitude of the country on the part of one who finds himself upon busy highways or "on the pavements gray"—

* Poems.

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the vales of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of linnet's wings.

These stanzas may find a place here the more properly because this poem—"Aedh Tells of a Valley Full of Lovers" * and "Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" * are other examples—stands for a

* The Wind Among the Reeds.

tendency that is in much of Mr. Yeats's verse, the tendency that is to slur the stress and to avoid emphatic rhythms. This is a characteristic of Gaelic verse, and it is in the work of translators from the Gaelic—Mangan and others.

All of Mr. Yeats's work is designed to be symbolic in his particular understanding of that word, as explained in *Ideas of Good and Evil,* of which more later in connection with that book. Suffice it to say here that by symbolism Mr. Yeats means the use of concrete images to convey abstract ideas or to evoke moods. Against his use of symbols, especially in the lyrics, the critics have complained grievously on the ground of their obscurity. For such complaints "Mongan La-

ments the Change that has Come upon Him and His Beloved" * has been one of the storm-centres. It may be quoted as an illustration of the occasional cloudiness that hangs over this poetry, and also because of the bearing it has upon what was said of the love lyrics:

Do you not hear me calling, white deer with no horns!
I have been changed to a hound with one red ear;
I have been in the Path of Stones and the Wood of Thorns,
For somebody hid hatred and hope and desire and fear
Under my feet that they follow you night and day.
A man with a hazel wand came without sound;

* The Wind Among the Reeds.

He changed me suddenly; I was looking another way;
And now my calling is but the calling of a hound;
And Time and Birth and Change are hurrying by.
I would that the boar without bristles had come from the West
And had rooted the sun and moon and stars out of the sky
And lay in the darkness, grunting, and turning to his rest.

Critics have accused Mr. Yeats of not having made plain in this poem why Mongan was changed to a hound, what the hazel-wand had to do with the changing, why the boar was expected to root the stars and the sun from the sky, and why it was to be hoped that the animal

would make his appearance from one point of the compass rather than from another. Questions of this breed, designed to pluck the heart of the mystery from an obscure imagery, are showered upon the lyrics. So far as the present instance is concerned, a slight acquaintance with old Irish romance and mythology explains the main drift of the meaning. When it is known that in Gaelic literature the longing of the lover for his beloved is symbolised continually by the hound's pursuit of the hornless deer, that the hazel is the druid's conjuring-rod, that the West, the place of sunset, is associated with fading and dreaming things, and that the boar is a symbol of destructive force, the mist that envelops the poem

is dissipated. Again and again a little acquaintance with the symbolism of the old literature, assisted by a little familiarity with Mr. Yeats's philosophy, will bring light out of darkness. But after all allowances have been made there remains a not inconsiderable part of his work that is darkened by a recondite imagery, which for him no doubt has a meaning—for no one would dare to appear so meaningless unless he felt he meant a great deal—but to the rest of mankind conveys no idea, induces no mood, and is at most a perspicuous gloom. That the author himself has felt that his symbolism needs illumination from without might be inferred from his having given nearly one-half of *The Wind Among the Reeds* to a run-

ning commentary of notes. Lines like these from "The Rider from the North" * are an instance of what seems like wanton obscurity:

Michael will unhook his trumpet
From a bough overhead,
And blow a little noise
When the supper has been spread.
Gabriel will come from the water
With a fish tail, and talk
Of wonders that have happened
On wet roads where men walk,
And lift up an old horn
Of hammered silver, and drink
Till he has fallen asleep
Upon the starry brink.

Here poetry becomes an enigma whose solution must be left to the fortunate few

* In The Seven Woods.

who possess that sixth sense in which Mr. Yeats finds Rossetti's edition of Blake so lamentably lacking—the sense for mystic and symbolic terms.

Nothing could serve better to bring into relief Mr. Yeats's point of view and peculiar lyrical gifts than a comparison of his poetry with that of Mr. Kipling. Mr. Kipling, too often hard, flashy, and materialistic, is the celebrator of imperialism. He loves the tumult of war and the din of labour, and sings of them with a rough and gusty energy, and in a language so plain that he who runs may read its whole meaning. He is too often an indifferent artist, speaking in the slang of the camp, and in accordance with the standards of the music-hall. Mr. Yeats

is the reverse of all this. He, and with him the men of the revival, stand opposed to the encroachments of a uniform civilisation that is destructive of national and provincial variations of every kind. He shuns the distractions of the workaday world and courts the solitary delights of the spirit. His poems are full of thought, spirituality, and lyrical phantasy, and have a music that is subtle, sweet, and beguiling. They are the product of an exacting artistic conscience, and everywhere wrought with the utmost care. If Mr. Kipling seeks too eagerly to catch the ear of the crowd, Mr. Yeats tends, on the contrary, to address himself to a cult, that understands the content of his art and speaks its language.

IV

PLAYS

Mr. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* * was one of the two plays with which the Irish Literary Theatre began its experiment. It achieved a deserved success, for no drama had ever before been presented in Ireland so inspired with the spirit of the race and so subtly and beautifully steeped in national dyes. The whole of it—and this holds true also of *The Land of Heart's Desire*,* and of many of the poems as well—seems to have taken shape under a purely and distinctively native

* Poems.

tradition of thought and sentiment, and to have sprung from long broodings upon the character of the Irish people, and the history and literature of the land. It is a complex symbol, summing up certain phases of national life, and much that is typical in national thought, sentiment, and temper. This play and *The Land of Heart's Desire* should be considered side by side, for the interest of each is enhanced by comparison with the other. They come from opposite sides of the Irish soul, and are inspired by opposing moods.

The scene of *The Countess Cathleen* is laid "in Ireland in old times." The incidents transpire during one of the famines that have periodically tried the soul of the land. The stricken peasantry

are presented in their extremity. Some call upon God and die; others, crying that "God and the mother of God have fallen asleep," traffic with demons, in the guise of merchants, who, in exchange for their souls, are offering the peasants gold wherewith to buy food to keep off the famine. The Countess Cathleen is the great lady of the famine-stricken district, who does all in her power for the poor, so thwarting the demons, whose trade, but for her charity, would go briskly on. To end the ministrations that interfere with their traffic, the demons steal the Countess's wealth, so that she is no longer able to help the starving poor. Distracted by the thought of their sufferings, she at length hits upon a plan to relieve them.

She sells her own soul to the demons at a great price, and gives the gold to the sufferers, thus saving them at the cost, as she believes, of her own salvation. But a vision at the close of the play tells that she is forgiven, because God judges the intention, not the deed.

An incident connected with the first performance of this play well illustrates the difference in temper between Irish and English audiences, of which something was said in speaking of the dramatic movement. It was an occurrence fit to add to the gaiety of nations, and sets one wondering what time of day it is with certain people in Ireland. A number of rough-and-ready theologians, it seems, regarding the act of the Deity

of the play in forgiving a woman who had forgotten her duty to the Church, and sold her soul to the devil, as a reflection upon the doctrines of Catholic orthodoxy, banded together to break up the heretical performance, a pious purpose that they were only prevented from putting into effect by a squad of police, who interfered in the interests of law and order. This ungracious reception of a work that had no end at all in theology Mr. Yeats himself has magnanimously persisted in regarding as one more testimony to the quality of his audiences—an illustration of the impassioned seriousness with which the Irishman takes his drama.

The Countess Cathleen is unmistakably Irish in setting, in subject, in character-

isation, in sentiment, style, and literary allusion. An atmosphere of the supernatural, an ever-present sense of mysterious powers that are at every turn influencing human life for evil or for good, is poured over the whole, and turns the every-day world to a wonder world, where angel visitants, fairies, and all the vague mythical creatures of popular tradition come and go in course. The personages, like everything else in it, are distinctively national—Cathleen herself, by virtue of that active sympathy for suffering, her ruling passion, out of which grows the self-sacrifice that is the master motive of the play. This touching spirit of true charity she inherits from that company of noble Irishwomen who in famine times

have sold their goods and served the poor, and, like her, have cried:

God pity them!
Bring all the old and ailing to this house,
For I will have no sorrow of my own from this day onward.

One may fancy, too, that in the suddenness of the impulsive act of self-sacrifice which prompts the farewell to the faith she loves, there is something quite in tune with the Irish nature. And in one way or another all the characters bear the national stamp. The peasants are true Irish peasants, and evidence enough in themselves of the perfect imaginative sympathy with which Mr. Yeats has entered into the lives of the Irish poor. The servants, in their mixed familiarity and

deference, as in their unmeasured devotion, are a completely native product, and so also the parish priest—

Who blessed the poor and raised the host.

Mr. Yeats has somewhere said that in Ireland Christianity and the old nature faith lie down together in the cabins of the peasantry. They are certainly made to lie down together in his poetry when *The Countess Cathleen,* in which an emotion of self-sacrifice that is essentially Christian rules, finds a place in the same volume with *The Land of Heart's Desire,* which is inspired by a mood that is purely pagan. The latter play is the culmination of the fairy poetry which Mr. Yeats has written, and in which he treats of the

fairies, the descendants of the nature gods of the ancient Irish, in the true myth-making spirit, informing these creatures, that are embodiments of the remoter states of the soul, with an intensity of spiritual life, feeling to the full their spiritual charm, and seeing them in that atmosphere of terror and mystery in which they naturally move. In his hands the old tales of fairyland take on a reality that, except in folk tales, they have seldom assumed, and this largely, perhaps, because they are recognised in an esoteric philosophy of his own as reflections, at least, of reality. No poet of the revival, indeed, no Irish poet who has written in English, has treated the fairies with so full an insight and knowledge. It was

under the spell of the fairy myths that "A Faery Song," * "The Stolen Child," * "The Man who Dreamed of Fairyland," * and a number of other poems were written. The lure to which the stolen child listened is always in the ears of the poet:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Still more familiar to his ear is the wilder call of the immortal band in "The Hosting of the Sidhe" †—

Away, come away:
Empty your heart of its mortal dream.
The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,

* Poems. † The Wind Among the Reeds.

Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are agleam,
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart;
And if anyone gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand,
We come between him and the hope of his heart.

The Land of Heart's Desire is founded upon folk tales, common among the peasantry, that tell of young brides stolen away by the fairies. Maire, Shawn's young wife, can find no content in the dull round of domestic tasks, nor in the doting love of her young husband. Unhappy, ill at ease, she lives in dreams of an unknown joy and in longing for the wild freedom of the winds and waves. In this mood of discontent she calls upon the fairies:

Come, faeries, take me out of this dull house!
Let me have all the freedom I have lost;
Work when I will and idle when I will!
Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,
For I would ride with you upon the wind,
Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,
And dance upon the mountains like a flame!

The call is answered; the fairy child enters, to lure Maire to the land

Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,
But joy is wisdom, Time an endless song.

* * * * * * *

Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue,
And where kind tongues bring no captivity,
For we are only true to the far lights
We follow singing over valley and hill.

The child at last departs, taking Maire's spirit with her to fairyland, and singing as she goes:

The faeries dance in a place apart,
Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring,
Tossing their milk-white arms in the air;
For they have heard the wind laugh and murmur and sing
Of a land where even the old are fair,
And even the wise are merry of tongue;
But I heard a reed of Coolaney say,
"When the wind has laughed and murmured and sung,
The lonely of heart is withered away."

In the characterisation of this little play, though there is no attempt at detail, every stroke tells, until at the end a group of typical figures has appeared,

surrounding the little fairy visitant from a world whose ways are strange and forbidden. The old priest, kindly, strong on the side of faith and morals, and wise within his limitations; Maurteen, the good man of the family, genial, indulgent, with his store of homespun wisdom; Shawn, the young husband, whose heart is a shrine for Maire, whom he loves the more perhaps because he understands her the less; Bridget, whose heart is right if her tongue is bitter; Maire herself, the dreaming peasant girl, weary of the humdrum, peaceful life—all these are presented as they can only be presented by one who knows the people intimately and has the light, sure touch of the artist. The fairy child herself, wayward, wanton, "clear of

the nets of wrong and right," a stranger to pieties and duties, is as lovely a symbol as could be desired of the non-moral energies of woods and streams and of their wild creatures. It is but natural that she who is soon to put on her womanhood and "marry the spirits of wood and water" should shrink in horror, as she does, from the crucifix—"The tortured thing! Hide it away"—the emblem of all that is hostile to her.

In *The Countess Cathleen* the theme was an act of self-sacrifice, springing from the spirit of charity which is one of the most distinctive of Irish characteristics. *The Land of Heart's Desire* embodies a wild, wanton, and irresponsible mood, primitive and pagan, that

Christianity has never tamed, and that still lives side by side with gentler emotions, and finds expression to-day in the fairy lore of the peasants. *Cathleen ni Hoolihan* keeps as close to the heart of Ireland as the two preceding dramas. It is a little one-act play in prose, charged in the highest degree with the same spirit of patriotism that inspired the lyrics "To Ireland in Coming Times" * and "The Song of the Red Hanrahan," † and is most remarkable for the way in which it kindles that spirit in others, by awakening in the few short speeches of The Poor Old Woman memories of the passions and sorrows of Ireland's past, and hopes for her future. When it was pre-

* Poems. † In The Seven Woods.

sented by the company of Irish actors in 1902 the murmur of approval, the magnetic stir in the audience, again and again told plainly how its points went home. The idea of *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*, like that of *On Baile's Strand* and the poem "The Cap and Bells;" * came to Mr. Yeats, as he says, in a dream. Cathleen ni Hoolihan is the name of The Poor Old Woman, the Shan Van Vocht of the song, one of the poetic embodiments of the spirit of Ireland, who, according to tradition, when war or trouble is at hand, goes up and down the land. The time of the play is 1798, when the French are landing at Killala. The scene is in the cabin of a peasant, where the arrange-

* The Wind Among the Reeds.

ments are being made for the marriage of Michael on the morrow. To the cabin comes The Poor Old Woman, telling a tale of strangers who have driven her from her house, and taken her four beautiful green fields (the four provinces of Ireland) from her; telling, too, of all the men who in the past had died for the love of her, and of those who are about to die in her service:

"It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will

be born, and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that had red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake; and for all that they will think they are well paid." The Poor Old Woman then calls upon Michael to follow her; the cry is raised that the French are in the bay; and Michael, leaving the girl he was to marry on the morrow, answers the summons. The play concludes with a touch that makes an impressive ending to what is impressive throughout. After The Poor Old Woman has left the cabin a little boy runs in, and is asked, as he enters, if he has seen an old woman going down the path. "I did not," he replies; "but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a

queen." In *Cathleen ni Hoolihan* the spirit of Ireland, old yet ever young, stood before the audience in a symbol.

In his next play Mr. Yeats found inspiration in the native turn for wit and humour, as he had before found it in the popular love of the land. *The Pot of Broth,* a little curtain-raiser, stands quite by itself as Mr. Yeats's only bit of pure comedy. It is the product of a genuine comic faculty, which, except in this single instance, has worked side by side with the tragic. The play is based upon a folk tale, which, as some may recall, finds a place in Griffin's novel, *The Collegians.* It tells of an ingenious beggar who gets a dinner by playing a trick with a wonderful stone, from which he claims a rich

broth can be made. It is genuinely droll, and its author here proves his versatility by acting as the purveyor of fun and laughter in the vein the Irish peasant loves.

The workings of the old Celtic leaven are clearly to be seen again in *Shadowy Waters,* one of Mr. Yeats's two dramas of the heroic age. This play is the product of a genius that is purely spiritual and romantic, without any infusion of the scientific and analytic. It tells of Forgael, a pirate or sea king, who has found mortal love "like the froth upon the ale," and is sailing in search of a mythic land, "where no love fades from its first sighs and laughter," a land that can "change love to imperishable fire." The motive be-

hind Forgael's quest is that impulse of the imagination which from time immemorial has sent the Celtic genius unceasingly in pursuit of the unknown, the evanescent, and the absolute. Voyaging to his country of a dream, Forgael captures on the way a galley that crosses his course, and takes from it a beautiful woman, Dectora. The aim of the play is to express Forgael's mood—one familiar enough to readers of Mr. Yeats's earlier poetry. Forgael can find no satisfaction in any of the activities in which—

Other men
Have found delight, in the resounding oars,
In day outliving battle, on the breast
Of some mild woman, or in children's ways.

Ill to please as he is, his fair captive loves him, and offers him her love:

Love was not made for darkness and the winds
That blow when heaven and earth are withering,
For love is kind and happy. O come with me!
Look on this body and this heavy hair;
A stream has told me they are beautiful.

* * * * * * *

The love I know is hidden in these hands
That I would mix with yours, and in this hair
That I would shed like twilight over you.

But Forgael disdains this proffer of a love of the heart and the senses—

I will have none of you.
My love shakes out her hair upon the streams
Where the world ends, or runs from wind to wind
And eddy to eddy.

He prepares to leave Dectora, when of a sudden her eyes are opened and she sees from his standpoint. Then for her as for

him life begins to wither away, and she cares "to gaze upon the world no longer." Love that is mortal and human is renounced, and the two, at last happily of one mind, drift off they know not whither in an impassioned quest of a love that is purely of the spirit.

Shadowy Waters stands for an undramatic tendency that is more or less evident in all Mr. Yeats's dramatic work, and leaves one thinking that he follows false fires when he writes for the stage. The plot counts for nothing, and the characters have but the outer semblance of men. They are mere symbols that enclose a mood, and lack the vital blend of action, thought, and emotion that belong to complete and complex humanity. There is no

attempt to create those typical personages who embody the spirit of great classes of the race, and in their noblest examples are the ideal creations toward which man and nature seem ineffectually struggling. The idealism of the play is intangible and ineffective, passing into luminous mist of sentimental longing and vague discontent, lovely and mysterious, but formless, adrift in the void, and even on the spiritual side unsubstantial.

On Baile's Strand, the second drama of the heroic age, of which something was said in an earlier chapter, has not the genuine inspiration, the varied and beautiful blank verse, and that atmosphere of the poet's peculiar genius, which is one of the subtlest expressions of temperament, and

which refuses to lend its charm to those poems of Mr. Yeats's that seek to make the active and militant side of the days of a glorious barbarism live again.

The faith in a spiritual life—not confined to a single church—is to-day, like the love of country that inspired *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*, one of the ruling passions of the Irish people. And out of this grew two of Mr. Yeats's plays that appeared last year—*The Hour-Glass: A Morality*, and *Where There Is Nothing*. The protagonist of the former play is a wise man and a teacher, who inculcates in his pupils the cocksureness of negation. Teigue, the fool, alone remains obdurate in belief, laughing at the wisdom of the wise. And the play tells how the fool's faith is the

salvation of the master. It is a little parable, designed to illustrate the author's view of religious truth as intuitive, and not to be come at by the reason.

Where There Is Nothing, a prose drama of mysticism, is the longest play Mr. Yeats has written, and the strangest piece of dramatic work he has brought before a public that had already felt the bewilderment of "The Rosa Alchemica." It is startling not merely because of the esoterism of the ideas, of which there is a plenty elsewhere, but because of the discrepancy between the familiar realistic setting of every-day contemporary life and the strangeness of the doctrine of which this is the vehicle. The person who holds the stage-centre throughout the

play is Paul Ruttledge, a rich country gentleman. He is a dreamer and a visionary, who finds no satisfaction in the duties of a landlord and magistrate, nor in the society about him, which is made up of people of narrow prejudices and limited views, who think in roosts and flocks, and in whose talk Paul always "hears some organised or vested interest chirp or quack, as it does in the newspapers." With these people, who live and move and have their being in conventions, religious or other, and who are untouched by the mysteries of life and death or the wonders of the inner life, which are all to him, he has no common standing-ground of sympathy. Looking at the institutions and organisations that surround him

from the idealist's standpoint, he can see only flaws and imperfections in what are the idols of the people among whom he was born and bred. Galled and fretted by a life that he finds insufferably tedious, he at length resolves to break away from it for good and all, and, leaving his possessions to his brother, he dons a ragged coat and joins a company of strolling tinkers, sharing their gipsy-like life, and warring with them upon the laws and institutions, which are too imperfect to find a sanction in his philosophy. Illness, that drives the hero to a monastery for refuge, ends this stage of his career. Once in the monastery his feelings change somewhat, and he gives himself to prayer and fasting, trying if by this path he can find his

Father that is in heaven. In due time he becomes a monk; but he soon breaks from the orthodoxy of the Church, and, with his strange talk and his fervent piety, is near to breaking up the whole monastery. A strange mood seizes upon him—a mood more common with eastern than with western minds—the passion to reach, while still in the body, a mystic union with the infinite, the thirst for the Nirvana. The escape from individual and mortal limitations, so he teaches his brother friars, the highway to the infinite, is through the destruction, so far as the individual mind is concerned, of all laws, philosophies, institutions, all worldly hopes, and of "thought the waster of life." Upon the ruins of all these, and when the

world has been snuffed out like a candle, then that place is reached "where there is nothing that is anything, and nobody that is anybody; one can be free there where there is nothing," for "where there is nothing there is God." Paul's fervour and sincerity mightily impress the ignorant friars by whom he is surrounded, and who, though incapable of understanding what he is really driving at, do still potently believe that he is on the track of some curious and much-to-be-desired spiritual discovery. The superior, hearing of the strange doctrines that are being taught, counts them heresy, and expels Paul from the monastery. He leaves, drawing some of the friars after him, and abandons himself to the religious ecstasy,

which, in its destruction of the individual soul, is a kind of spiritual suicide. Paul, and the friars who have followed him, soon draw upon themselves the hostility of the peasantry, who regard them as enemies of the Church, and who at last drive the friars away and kill Paul himself.

In this play a realistic method and setting are employed that contrast strangely with the romantic manner and misty no-man's land of *Shadowy Waters*. And the grotesque element is strong throughout. It is an extraordinary farrago of the Philistine propriety of the life of the gentry, the frank rascality and salty comedy of the life of the wandering tinkers, and the wild laughter or half-mad religious ecstasy of the hero.

The critics of Mr. Yeats's works for the stage have not in general felt certain as to their technical qualities as acting plays, nor have they allowed to Mr. Yeats himself strong dramatic gifts. Lionel Johnson ventured to surmise—what was not perhaps as a matter of fact the case—that Mr. Yeats wrote for the stage rather from a desire to have his verses spoken than from a strong bent for the drama. Considered from the dramatic standpoint, *The Countess Cathleen* is perhaps the best of his plays, though, to cite Lionel Johnson's opinion again, "it is, in truth, a narrative in dramatic form and a lyrical setting" rather than a pure drama. Its motive is simple, direct, and of strong human interest. Though firmly knit and

shapely, it is not structurally robust. The action involves no obstinate struggle of opposing motives in the soul of Cathleen herself, and no stirring dramatic conflict between the forces of good and evil in the play. The plot could scarcely be freer from complexity of motive and incident. The dramatic knot is tied and untied in the simplest way. If the climax scene, where Cathleen resolves to sell her soul to save the souls of the poor, is not made the most of dramatically, as an offset to this there are minor moments of interest all through, and strong, concrete handling in the separate scenes. This play has, at all events, rare excellencies enough to justify itself completely to all but critics of the technique of the drama. Its grace and

dignity of utterance, its delightfully varied, subtle, and melodious blank verse, its fine literary faculty, its emotional fervour, and the secondary meanings that show shadowy faces at every turn, give it a many-sided interest and charm. *The Land of Heart's Desire* is slighter dramatically than its predecessor, and with little of the clash of opposing motives that is of the essence of the drama. *Cathleen ni Hoolihan* is no more than a scene, but, allowing for its limitations, nothing that Mr. Yeats has written is more dramatically effective. *Where There Is Nothing* deals with states of mind that are too subtle and remote to fit well into the concrete mould of the drama. This play, with its strange mixture of the comic, the

grotesque, and the tragic, might hold an audience from sheer bewilderment; but it lacks the general human interest that alone can make a deep appeal. It is, however, a good illustration of Mr. Yeats's extraordinary faculty for embodying ideas that are difficult, intangible, and elusive.

Shadowy Waters and *On Baile's Strand,* the two dramas of the heroic age, contrast sharply with each other. *Shadowy Waters* is, in its own way, as remote and impalpable in mood and as subtle in motive as *Where There Is Nothing.* It is essentially lyrical; or, if it be allowed to pass for a drama, a stage success would certainly seem to be out of the question. With *On Baile's Strand,* of

which something has already been said, motive and sentiment are, on the contrary, simple and direct. If it is not tragically impressive, it is at least interesting, because of its dramatic method. The tragic situation is brought into strong relief against scenes of comedy furnished by the blind man and the fool, two rude clowns, who must owe something of their fantastic foolery and glimmerings of sense to Shakespearean creations of the same kind. It is interesting, again, because in it the poet seems to have stepped out of the dreamland in which so much of his poetry has been written; to have shaken off the preoccupations of his mysticism; and to have regarded his characters and his incidents from a standpoint

more completely objective than he has ever before assumed toward his material. In a note prefixed to this play Mr. Yeats wrote:

"The first shape of it came to me in a dream, but it changed much in the making, foreshadowing, it may be, a change that may bring a less dream-burdened will into my verses." *On Baile's Strand* may then turn out to be a landmark in Mr. Yeats's work, as he has half promised that it will, an augury, and one that will be welcome to many, of poems and plays that shall take a firmer grasp upon the outer world.

V

PROSE

To recall the varied interests that have found a place in the part of Mr. Yeats's work that has already been considered—in the poems and dramas that draw inspiration from Irish legend and folklore, from modern Irish life in its humorous, pathetic, and patriotic aspects, from the artist's quest of beauty, and from the mystic spirit, is to say that Mr. Yeats has variety and a wide range. The impression of versatility is strengthened in passing on to his prose work, which includes stories and sketches, contributions

to fairy and folk lore, editorial work of various kinds, a volume of literary essays, and a good deal of miscellaneous criticism.

John Sherman and Dhoya, which appeared in "The 'Unknown' Library" as long ago as 1891, and has never been formally fathered by the author, was his first prose publication. "Dhoya," which reads like an imitation of a folk tale, is quite unimportant, and no way comparable to the prose tales that have appeared since. But "John Sherman," in one respect at least, has a special claim to attention. It is the one story of its author that could be described as a study of contemporary life, and it is the only work in which he shows an interest in character

on its own account or makes any attempt at the analysis of it. The little tale has had less notice than it deserves. In it everything is seen from a fixed and characteristic standpoint, that lends a charm to all that transpires. Its quiet pensiveness, its clear minor key of feeling, make an appeal of their own. A fringe of sentiment and culture set off its unpretentious simplicity, and lend it an air of distinction. The character contrasts are admirably effective—types of those who live in the rippling shallows of life set off against those who know its still depths, John Sherman's quiet strength against the superficial cleverness of a self-complacent clerical prig, and the faithfulness and thoughtfulness of the heroine against

the sparkling flippancy of her rival. The characterisation is throughout firm and fine, and at the close the reader's acquaintance is agreeably enlarged by an intimacy with a hero and heroine well worth the meeting. But it was with *The Celtic Twilight*, which followed *John Sherman and Dhoya*, that the author struck into the path, where he still loves best to wander, that led him through rural scenes familiar to his boyhood, and to cabins where, in the evening by the turf fire, the folk tales pass from mouth to mouth. This little volume is based upon a notebook in which the author wrote down stories he heard from the peasant of County Sligo and recorded incidents and associations of his early life. It is inter-

esting for the light it throws upon the atmosphere and surroundings that were to give colour and direction to his later work, and has also the charm that comes from the breath of poetry in it, and from the light touch in the portraiture of the finer shades of peasant character.

The Secret Rose and *The Tables of the Law*—the latter privately printed—are the product of the mystic spirit, which, though its presence was felt in *The Celtic Twilight,* remained in that book somewhat in the background. They are volumes of prose tales that lead through dark by-ways of the occult, and bristle with esoteric ideas wild and strange enough to affright a traveller who has kept to the great highways of literature

and thought. The tales of *The Secret Rose* are mostly of an antique cast, and in part the vehicle of mystic ideas that have already appeared in the poems and dramas. Their symbolism is often cloudy and obscure, a riddle to which the author alone holds the key. Who, for example, could have come unaided at the hidden meaning of Hanrahan, Michael Robartes, and Aedh, symbolical personages of these tales, unless the author had let out the secret in the notes (which themselves here and there would not be the worse for a gloss) of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, where he writes:

"Hanrahan is the simplicity of an imagination too changeable to gather permanent possessions, or the adoration of

the shepherds; and Michael Robartes is the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its possessions, or the adoration of the Magi; while Aedh is the myrrh and frankincense that the imagination offers continually before all that it loves."

In two of the stories of *The Secret Rose,* "Where There Is Nothing There Is God" and "Out of the Rose," is the germ of the play that gets its name from the title of the first of them. In another the author returns to a favourite theme—the vanity of knowledge of the scholastic variety. Thoroughly characteristic of the ethics of this kind of mysticism is "The Crucifixion of the Outcast," in which the reckless vagabondage of the

hero of the tale, who has drawn the sword, told the truth, and lived his vision, is contrasted favourably with the religious formalism of the monks. For the rest, this book is designed to present various aspects of the war of the world upon the life of the spirit. It is peopled with men filled with vague spiritual longings for they know not what, and athirst for unimaginable experiences, and of men and women who have followed passion with their whole souls, and have sought in one another "no blossom of mere youth but a beauty coeval with night and the stars," and who, because of that, and despite the trouble they have wrought in the world, live forever apart from "the unpeaceful and the perishing." To speak in detail

of these stories here is impossible, but a word may be said of the "Rosa Alchemica," the strangest of them all. The people of the story are alchemical mystics, belonging to the order of the Alchemical Rose, who, if they seek to make gold of baser metals, do so only as an incident in "an universal transmutation of all things into one divine and imperishable substance," as a "gradual distillation of the contents of the soul, until they are ready to put off the mortal and put on the immortal." They have all a part in "some undefinable, passionate life, which had begun to war upon their careful and orderly days." They believed in the independent, eternal existence of thoughts and moods, and that these may, under the

spell of mystic and magician, descend and appear to the eyes of men. With these spiritual existences or immortal spirits, who, by the compulsion of a mystic ritual, cease to be cries and shadows, take visible form, and consort with mortals in the temple of the Alchemical Rose, they seek a mystical communion. Whatever may be thought of "The Rosa Alchemica," there is in it that passion for supernatural knowledge which has always, down through the generations, been as a consuming thirst to minds of a certain type. A mysticism as dark and obscure as that of "The Rosa Alchemica" is in *The Tables of the Law*. The Aherne in the first of the two stories in the volume would have been welcomed with

open arms to the temple of the Rose. Like the Alchemical mystics, he has drowned his reason in a sea of inexpressible mysticism, "has risen above the formalisms of half-education and the rationalisms of conventional affirmation and denial," and has "turned away from practicable desires and intuitions toward desires so unbounded that no human vessel can contain them, toward intuitions so immaterial that their sudden and far-off fires leave heavy darkness about head and foot."

From the literary point of view, merely as a tale of the supernatural, "The Rosa Alchemica" is perhaps the best of the stories in either *The Secret Rose* or *The Tables of the Law*. The touch of awe is

in its tense, nervous style, excitement in the hurried accents of the narrator, and the air of the whole is electric with terror. A thrill goes out from it that is a new literary experience, unlike the thrill that comes from any of the tales of terror which suggest themselves in the way of comparison.

The rest of Mr. Yeats's prose work—the prose plays mentioned in the preceding chapter excepted—is critical, and the best of it is included in the collection of essays entitled *Ideas of Good and Evil.* This book is interesting first of all for the exposition of mysticism and symbolism, which is found especially in the essays on magic and symbolism, and in those on the work of Shelley and of Blake.

A neophyte in mysticism will perhaps find no better preparation—so far as the written word is concerned—for initiation into the cult than that offered by these essays, where the author, with a firm hand and with all the clearness the subject permits, orders his company of subtle and elusive ideas, leads the reader on to his point of view, and creates the condition of mind most favourable to the reception of the mystic faith. To understand the imaginative work of Mr. Yeats, some acquaintance with his philosophical doctrines is indispensable, for poems, stories, and plays do not adequately light up each other. Any attempt at a brief summary of these doctrines, gathered from his own illustration and exposition,

will seem to those of mystic leanings to give no more than a crude and imperfect notion of them. But the good intention of providing, for those who love poetry and are disinclined to prose disquisition, a standpoint from which much that is obscure can be seen more clearly, may serve as the excuse for such an attempt.

The mysticism of Mr. Yeats, like the mysticism of many times and many countries, holds to a belief in one great mind, one great memory, the mind and memory of nature herself. Of this great mind and memory our minds and memories are a part, sometimes separated from it, sometimes passing over into it and bearing away treasures of eternal wisdom. This great mind is, first of all, the dwelling-

place of the immortal moods, those "disembodied powers whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions," the gods of an earlier, the angels of a later dispensation, and the real rulers of the world, in whose hands are the destinies of men. It is the storehouse also of the perfect images of all things, in imitation of which the world is being continually remade, somewhat after the Platonic fashion; and of the symbols, which in the great memory are inseparably associated with the memorable personages, passions, and events of the ages. And just here the doctrine of symbolism properly unfolds itself.

Symbols find a place in all great literature. They are the element of sug-

gestion and evocation. In their simplest form they are little more than metaphors, but in the hands of the symbolist who knows how to develop the capacity of form for suggestion and allusion, they become more and more complex, attempting, by the forms of material things, to represent moral, intellectual, and spiritual things, and justifying this process by the claim of eternal correspondences between the worlds of matter and of spirit. Symbolism should not be confused with allegory. Allegory says things that could be said as well or better in another way; symbolism says things that could not be said so perfectly in any other way. The power of the symbol in its simplest form for the evocation of a mood and for mys-

terious suggestion may be illustrated in lines like these:

'Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
Upon the beached verge of the salt flood;
Who once a day with his embossed froth
The turbulent surge shall cover.'

A passage of this kind is no sooner read than a strange effect is produced. Whatever of thought or incident may be connected with such lines receives in some way a new memorableness, a new charm, a new potency by association with this bit of symbolism and the magic of the mood which it evokes. Symbols come into existence when, for example, streams of intense passion or spiritual experiences of any kind are poured about human forms or the forms of material things,

until these passions and experiences become, as it were, absorbed in the forms, inherent in them, part and parcel of them. Or, to put it in a different way, all things, so soon as they entangle immortal moods and unmixed emotions in a complex web of forms, colours, sounds, and movements, become symbols. Thus all things in heaven and earth may become the signature of spiritual powers. These symbols may be fashioned by the artist, by the great memory, or by the mere association of material and spiritual things. And once created they are taken into the great mind forever, and are forever capable, if thrown out by this great mind, of planting thoughts, moods, and motives in the souls of men who contemplate them.

These symbols, in the view of the symbolists, transcend particular time and place, pass beyond death, and in a sense become immortal souls. Symbols are simple, or subtle and complex—"as full of mysterious life as the body of a flower or a woman," according to the nature of that which is inherent in them.

These beliefs as to the great memory and symbolism are brought into relation with Mr. Yeats's philosophy of poetry through his conception of the imagination. The imagination in his view is the winged messenger between the immortal world of the great memory and man. Before it, in its moments of exaltation, in mystic trance, in madness, or in deep meditation, the great mind unfolds itself

in symbols. It leaves in the imagination these shapes of wisdom with souls of beauty, forms at whose heart are the moods and impulses that rule man and society. In these revelations the mystic finds his great happiness, and the task of the symbolist and mystic, who is artist as well, is to set his revelations before the world as best he may, in songs and poems, or by the chisel and the brush. The poet, according to this philosophy, is a great magician, conjuring with spiritual powers, holding up symbols before the world, whose immortal moods work their will with man.

The function of art being the invocation of spiritual influences upon the world, it follows that only such and so much

material should be used by art as serves that end. In other words, realism must be utterly banished, and no place left for the merely mimetic, for natural description for the sake of description, for anecdote for the sake of anecdote, or for scientific opinion on its own account. The business of art, in short, is not with thought and criticism, but with revelation and invocation.

When the ideas of this mystic philosophy have become in some measure familiar, one turns with interest to observe their bearing upon the conduct of life. With the mystic that which absorbs attention is not the life of man, and the world in which he lives, but what is beyond—the spiritual stream that flows un-

changed and forever behind the external, visible, changing circumstance of time. The earth is but dust under his feet, a standpoint from which to gaze into the darkness, that, like a heavy curtain, is drawn across the mysteries beyond. His energies are concentrated upon catching the mystic gleam and vision, upon hearing the whisper of mysterious voices. In the light of these revelations the world we live in is a poor, dilapidated place, and all its ways are but vanity. From this state of mind comes the quietism that is the practical side of this philosophy. Mysticism, preoccupied with the spiritual, sets small store by the qualities that make for mastery and success in the world. It never aims to make life here happy and

triumphant. The value of vigour and robustness, as may be seen, for example, in "The Autumn of the Body," one of the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil,* is discounted. Men of affairs, because they busy themselves with things and notions blown up out of their own time, are men of darkness. Where communion with a world beyond the senses is regarded as first and last the one important thing, it is natural that the amelioration of man by laws, by institutions, by changes in the social scheme, and by the light that comes from wider knowledge, should be a matter of small moment. Spiritual revelations and illuminations are the things needful, and man's first care should be to order his life in the way that will be most

favourable to their reception. And this way lies through withdrawal from the turmoil and struggle of life, through freeing the mind from restlessness and self-seeking, and cultivating in the extreme meditative and intuitive methods. Then at last, when the body has been laid asleep, the soul, smoothed into a quiet water, will be ready to reflect whatever the heavens are willing to reveal. In this state there float into the mind gleams of an undefinable wisdom, visions, which, interpreted by the imagination, are man's most precious store of knowledge. These come, if they come at all, in transcendental fashion, as inspirations and intuitions. For science and philosophy, and for whatever in the world is based upon

reason and observation, the mystics care nothing. From this contempt for reason arises, perhaps, their singular regard for fools and madmen, in whom that faculty is quite extinguished or flickers but feebly. Fools, the mystics feel, have glimmerings of a wisdom beyond the wisdom of the wise, and madness they regard as the shadow of a knowledge more precious than the knowledge of men whose faculties are bound together in the sober health of the brain that is called sanity. It will be remembered that it was a fool, in *The Hour-Glass,* who was wiser than the learned. It was a fool that sent Forgael, in *The Shadowy Waters,* upon his quest. It was the mad King Goll to whom nature whispered mystic

secrets. Indeed, bewilderment and incapacity, so far as this life is concerned, seem to be accepted as assurances of a firmer grasp upon another. This quietism, almost always the companion of mysticism, tends to weaken all human relations, and to paralyse the individual for action. *Ideas of Good and Evil* expresses it in an extreme form—the following passage, for example, which speaks of the practical bearing of a phase of mystic faith:

"It is perhaps well that so few believe in it, for if many did many would go out of parliaments and universities and libraries and run into the wilderness to so waste the body, and to so hush the unquiet mind, that, still living, they might

pass the doors the dead pass daily; for who among the wise would trouble himself with making laws or in writing history or in weighing the earth, if the things of eternity seemed ready to hand?" *

But quietism, with its moral inertia, is not the only outgrowth of this mystic philosophy. From it comes also the doctrine, overriding morality as quietism neglects it, that man should abandon himself without restraint to the passion that rules in his breast. And this doctrine is justified by the conception of the soul as an entity distinct from the body, and incapable of being soiled by the sins of the body. Morality is a practical matter, based upon the small prudences that

* Ideas of Good and Evil, p. 60.

make for the body's well-being. With this the soul has no concern. On the contrary, it is on the wings of intense and unmixed passions, as well as in meditation and trance, that the soul escapes into an immortal state of pure being. Man then should follow the devices of his heart, evil or good as the chance may be, with the wings of the wind, for spiritual happiness overtakes those alike who have sought it in asceticism, or in abandonment to desire, "in the Holy Sepulchre, or in the wine-vat"—

And blessedness goes where the wind goes,
And when it is gone we are dead;
I see the blessedest soul in the world
*And he nods a drunken head.**

* The Wind Among the Reeds, p. 47.

A free flight and an infinite goal are in this morality the things to be sought, and lethargies and timidities are the unpardonable sins. Madness is better than lifeless sanity, and dissipation than emotional penury. Like the morality of Blake, this morality cries "Put off holiness," and recommends that each take to his bosom passion and imagination.

There are many correspondences between these views of Mr. Yeats on the one hand and those of Blake and the French symbolists and mystics on the other. How much is due to coincidence and how much to direct influence it is difficult to say. Mr. Yeats, like Blake, has always been a visionary; and in Blake he finds a mysticism and symbolism, and a

scheme of ethics akin to his own. Both these poets make a religion of their art, and hold that the men who used to "make their souls" by hearing sermons now do so by reading imaginative literature. The influence of the French writers seems to be one of the spirit and not of the letter. From any one of them, from Gérard de Nerval on, he might have learned—had he not already taken to it by instinct or been taught it by Blake—to put that emphasis upon all the literary elements that get their effect from suggestion, allusion, or the association of ideas, which, aside from its transcendental aspect, is the distinctive characteristic of symbolism. In Villiers de L'Isle-Adam is that quietism which found epigrammatic expression in

the sentence from *Axël*—"As for living, our servants will do that for us"—which serves as a motto to *The Secret Rose.* The striking similarity between de Régnier's conception of symbolism and the views of it expressed in *Ideas of Good and Evil* might lead, as it has led some, to the belief that here at least there was direct influence. But, as a matter of fact, it happens that Mr. Yeats is a complete stranger to de Régnier's work. And finally, Le Sar Peladan, a French exponent of the "black art," may have influenced his beliefs in regard to magic as avowed and explained in the essays. Whether there was such influence, or what it may have been, it is impossible to say. It is certain, however, that it was

Mr. Yeats's interest in magic that led him to cultivate the acquaintance of Peladan, and not Peladan who interested him in that subject.

A most interesting comparison, which would turn out to be in many respects a contrast, might be drawn between Mr. Yeats and his Belgian contemporary and fellow-mystic, Maeterlinck. Mr. Yeats is the finer artist, with a gift beyond that of Maeterlinck for giving concrete form to difficult and subtle ideas. He has, also, a more intimate sense of relationship with spiritual powers, and more of the religious impulse that grows out of it. But the strongest contrast between the two men will be found to lie in their ethics. Maeterlinck at first, like Mr. Yeats, held

the soul a separate entity, unaffected by the acts of the body. But in *Monna Vanna,* and in the essays that followed *Le Trésor des Humbles,* his views change radically, and the well-being, even the existence, of the soul is made to depend on the choices that it makes in the sphere of conduct. The mysticism of Mr. Yeats is consumed with a thirst for supernatural knowledge, and in seeking it, cares little or nothing for its practical bearing upon the life of man in its moment of mortal existence. On the contrary, Maeterlinck's great desire is the amelioration of man's estate here and now, while he walks the earth and draws this mortal breath. He sends his thoughts ranging in the darkness, that they may bring back balm for

the heart's wounds, solace for care, and a store of wisdom for the conduct of life.

These mystic beliefs and the doctrines of symbolism as Mr. Yeats understands them rest entirely upon a supernatural basis. They can commend themselves only to those who find for them a supernatural sanction. To a rational sanction they do not pretend. The same holds good of the ethics that goes with the mysticism. Those who do not share Mr. Yeats's views of the supernatural and of man's relation to it, will not be apt to assent to a quietism that makes no attempt to come to terms with life, relaxes its grip upon it, turns its eyes inward, and in so doing counts the world well lost. Nor will they be likely to assent to the

alternative of giving the loose rein to the passions and riding rough-shod over all that, from the moralist's standpoint, makes for the well-being of the body and the spirit. But Mr. Yeats's practice is better than his preaching. He is, in fact, always ready to lend a hand to every practical movement that makes for the welfare of Ireland; he is an enthusiastic dramatic reformer with a propaganda; and the moral tone and total tendency of his poetry is pure, high, and above reproach. Decadent—that word of uncertain import—has been now and again applied to his poetry. It has no meaning except in relation to his theoretical ethics.

But *Ideas of Good and Evil* treats of many matters besides mysticism and sym-

bolism. Two of the essays, "What is 'Popular' Poetry" and "The Galway Plains," grow out of the study of the verses the people make for themselves, and aim to distinguish this genuine popular literature based upon an unwritten tradition, from the great poetry based upon written tradition on the one hand, and on the other from the so-called popular poetry of writers like Macaulay, Mrs. Hemans, and Longfellow, which strikes its roots deep into no tradition and is really a poetry of the middle class. Others of the essays—"At Stratford-on-Avon," "The Theatre," "The Celtic Element in Literature," and "Ireland and the Arts"—deal with matters more or less directly connected with the aims and ideals

of the literary and dramatic activity in Ireland. In the essay "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" he makes Shelley out to be a good mystic and symbolist in his special understanding of those words, and in the essays on William Blake he dwells on phases of Blake's philosophy that are in large part at one with his own. On the whole, *Ideas of Good and Evil* is a strikingly fresh, vital, and subtle piece of criticism, that pours a stream of original and suggestive ideas about every matter with which is it concerned. The book derives a singular unity of impression from the author's consistently presenting every subject from his own fixed and characteristic standpoint.

Ideas of Good and Evil is far from

including all of Mr. Yeats's work in criticism. He has selected and furnished critical introductions to a number of collections of Irish stories and poems — *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry, Representative Irish Tales, Stories from Carleton,* and *A Book of Irish Verse*—this last an anthology of some hundred and odd poems, the choicest flowers of Irish poetry in English. Mr. Yeats knows Irish life—not one phase of it merely, but all its elements—as no other critic in the same field knows it, and with a full knowledge there goes a perfect sympathy. Combining with this special equipment a broad culture, he is enabled to see the significance of the productions he considers as expressions of

national life, and in relation to the literature of other countries. Up to his time there had been no such illuminating criticism of Anglo-Irish literature. Mr. Yeats has also contributed much criticism to *Beltaine* and *Samhain*, the organs respectively of the Irish Literary Theatre and the National Irish Theatre Society, both of which he edited. These little publications constitute at once a history and a running critical commentary—and very vital, incisive, and much-needed criticism it is too—of the origin and growth of the dramatic activity in Ireland. In addition to all this work Mr. Yeats, in collaboration with Mr. Ellis, brought out the admirable edition of Blake, with its life of the poet, and complete editorial equip-

ment, of which mention has already been made.

In his prose work, as in his poetry, Mr. Yeats has found a style of his own, which, while quite un-English, is, in all but a certain aroma and spirit, not easy to analyse, in accord with the traditions of English prose. Its characteristics vary considerably between the early stories and sketches and *Ideas of Good and Evil.* But like the style of his poetry, it has everywhere a vocal quality—the flexibility, easy movement, and breathing-places of living speech. In *John Sherman and Dhoya* and in *The Celtic Twilight* it is the style of a poet and dreamer, subdued in tone, meditative, wistful, lit now and again by beauty, or warmed by a quiet humour. It

is everywhere gracious, easy, and familiar, by its manner presupposing a single friendly listener. In *The Secret Rose* the style becomes more musical and highly coloured, flowing on in rhythms richer and more varied. For the more or less formal literary essays that followed a new manner of expression, fit to carry a weight of thought and clothe subtle and difficult ideas, was demanded. *Ideas of Good and Evil* met the new demands, and with no loss of the ease and poetic quality that belonged to the earlier work. It is to praise the style of this book highly, but not beyond its deserts, to say that it resembles the style of Shelley's critical prose. If it lack the bright speed, the splendour, and the enthusiasm of *The Defence of*

Poetry, it still resembles that wonderful essay in its unfailing lucidity and grace of utterance, and in the delightful variety of cadences that respond immediately to the thought. A nervous life runs from end to end of the sentences, and binds them all together from the opening to the closing of each essay. And quite as much as the earlier work these essays have a rhythm of their own, and with this a freshness of diction and a faculty for effective phrasing. Above all, there is distinction in the style—taste and tact, humour, telling allusion, or what not, crowning all that is said with some touch that lifts it quite clear of the hackneyed and commonplace.

The future will look back to Mr. Yeats

as to a landmark in the literary history of Ireland, both because of his artistic achievement and because he has been a leader in a remarkable movement. Through his poetry the Celtic spirit moves like a fresh wind. The quest of the ideal in all its forms, faith in the unseen life, the passion for romance and mystery, the pursuit of the intangible and evanescent, a vague melancholy and a vague unrest, the shrinking from the tumult of the world, characteristic of a race that has not greatly succeeded in dealing with the actualities of life—these are Celtic traits, and all of them are vital in the creations of Mr. Yeats's art. No living poet has created as nobly as he from the store of Gaelic myth, legend,

and tradition. And no poet of the younger generation can show a body of poetic work at once so finished in detail and so sustained in poetic quality. Mr. Yeats is the chief English-writing representative of the mystic and symbolist movements. As a mystic he has followed doubtful gleams over the dim frontiers of an undiscovered country, has voyaged in strange seas of thought, and brought back tales of strange spiritual adventures. His philosophy, whether or no its specific doctrines find acceptance, throws a romantic interest over life, and quickens in all who come under its spell a sense of the mystery that abides in common things. Like his contemporary and fellow-mystic, Maeterlinck, he is a leader in a movement

which now seems gathering force against that externality in life of which the theatre of the day is the great monument. And the reaction against the drama of commerce, which is spreading everywhere, has found its best expression in the dramatic organisations which Mr. Yeats and his associates founded. In the Ireland of to-day Mr. Yeats is important as the leader in a literary awakening that may go far toward bringing into being what Ireland most needs—a cultivated national public.

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